

BREAKTHROUGH FAIRYTALES BOOK ONE

A woman with long, dark, wavy hair and a tiara stands in a misty, forest-like setting. She is wearing a light blue, long-sleeved gown with intricate lace detailing on the bodice and sleeves. She holds a single red rose in her left hand. The background is a soft, ethereal blue with hints of green foliage.

THE DARK PRINCE'S CHOICE

A decorative flourish consisting of symmetrical, swirling lines and small floral motifs.

A CINDERALLA & BEAUTY AND THE BEAST RETELLING
KATELYN DALIATH

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The Dark Prince's Choice

A Cinderella and Beauty and The Beast retelling

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Prologue

Austrella's pace slowed. Her gaze slid over the wall, tracing the intricate design of a forest. Soft candlelight illuminated the corridor, casting dancing shadows on the walls. Her steps instinctively followed the housekeeper, but ceased for a moment.

Closing her eyes, she inhaled the familiar air she had breathed a decade ago. Echoes of the past whispered around her, taking her ten years back when she'd come here for her cousin Aquila's birthday, ran through the corridors to the kitchen, and bantered with the cook.

"Miss Rella, what are you doing?"

Her eyes snapped open to find the head housekeeper, Mrs. Wetmore, looking at her with eyebrows raised. Mrs. Wetmore appeared stern, clad in a black tidy dress, but she was a kind old woman. Ten years ago, she was quite fond of Austrella, but now she didn't recognize her—exactly what Austrella wanted.

Austrella flushed in embarrassment. "Oh, um, nothing. Nothing at all." She forced a smile, her voice unnaturally high-pitched, and moved towards the older woman. "Just admiring t-the... *designs*."

Don't smile too much, she told herself, pinching her arm to restrain her smile.

Mrs. Wetmore kept her eyebrows raised. "With your eyes closed?" Her question sent Austrella's heart racing, but she saved her from answering by waving a hand dismissively. "Anyway, come on, we're almost there. You will have plenty of years to admire the design as much as you want to if you are staying, but now is not the time. We're preparing for His Grace's family dinner."

Austrella picked up her pace with Mrs. Wetmore who practically rushed ahead. She and Aquila used to make fun of Mrs. Wetmore's fast pace, saying that she didn't know how to walk *normally*.

“F-family dinner?”

Finding work as a servant in her uncle’s manor, she knew she would cross paths with her uncle and family, but her facial features had changed so much in a decade that she and her parents believed no one would recognize her. After all, she was only nine the last time they saw her.

As desperate as she was, to go and reveal herself to them, she couldn’t risk it. Her uncle was still in the position of the duke, and what if he was on the dark prince’s side?

The dark prince who invaded their country, killed her brother, and whose father was now the king.

“His Grace’s younger brother, the viscount, left the country when their older brother and family were killed, and now after ten years, he has returned. So, His Grace is holding a family dinner tonight.”

Austrella’s eyes widened. Her pace slowed again and she stiffened. *Killed?* Did everyone believe that they were killed, while in truth, they had escaped? If only Mrs. Wetmore knew that the girl she was currently talking to was one of those she believed to be dead.

After all these years of believing that their people must have realized they had escaped, it was a shocking revelation that they believed her family had been killed.

“Anyway, let’s return to you now. You have no experience, you say? Well then, we will soon find out where you will fit in.”

As they neared the kitchen, the air shifted with the scent of boiling stews and freshly baked bread. Austrella’s mouth watered at the delicious smell. She hadn’t eaten anything delicious in the past ten years, and now this enchanting aroma made her stomach growl with hunger.

The door to the expansive kitchen swung open. The last time she’d seen such an expansive kitchen was ten years ago, and it had been much more expansive and grander than this one. The kitchen was filled with bustling figures of the kitchen staff.

Long wooden tables lined the center of the room, filled with vegetables waiting to be chopped, and cuts of meat ready to be cooked. Cooks in white aprons expertly prepared ingredients, their knives flashing. The maids hurried around, some washing dishes, some fetching things, carrying plates there and

here. Some bakers worked at a far corner, their flour-dusted hands kneading dough.

Austrella barely held herself back. The savory aroma was almost unbearable. She wanted to eat *now*.

Mrs. Wetmore led her further into the kitchen. At their presence, a few heads turned. "Ah, who's this young lady?" one of them asked.

Austrella plastered on a smile, her eyes shifting from table to table, taking in all different food.

She *needed* to eat now.

Mrs. Wetmore's voice carried easily through the room as she introduced her. "Everyone, may I present, Miss Rella Austen. She will be one of us from now on, though she's quite uncertain where her talent lies."

Austrella was consumed by nervousness as every head turned to her. The address felt so strange. It was as though Mrs. Wetmore was introducing someone else.

Because she wasn't Rella Austen.

She had returned to her country, Catsimoor, with a fake identity. A fake name and a fake story.

She was Austrella. However, from now on, she would have to live as Rella Austen.

From a castle to a kitchen. From the highest level to the lowest.

Rather than wasting away her whole life hidden in the woods, her parents had wanted Austrella to go somewhere and live her life with the faith that she wouldn't be recognized. Therefore, she chose to return to her country and stay close to her family members even if they couldn't recognize her. Living as a servant in her uncle's manor was the best option for that.

The staff broke into wide smiles and nods of welcome.

"Welcome, Miss Austen!" a cheerful young maid called out, stepping up to meet her. Her blonde curls escaped the cap she wore and her blue eyes twinkled as she smiled. She appeared to be around Austrella's age, or perhaps a little older. "We're pleased to have you here."

"Indeed, a new face is what I wanted. I was getting bored with the same old faces every day," one of the men said, sending a wink her way.

Many rolled their eyes; some chuckled while some scoffed amusedly. Austrella didn't fight her smile.

"Ignore him, Miss Austen, he just loves his friends so much that he gets bored with their faces every day," the young maid said, rolling her eyes. "Anyway, I must admit I'm pleased to have someone young around. It is really hard to be surrounded by people *twice* your age!"

"Hey! I'm not twice your age, Marilee!" the man who spoke earlier shouted in protest. He appeared to be around early thirties.

Marilee rolled her eyes again, and Austrella's smile widened. "It's nice meeting you. You can call me Rella."

"And you can call me Marilee. It would be great if you could work with me—that is if you don't have anything else in mind. I would appreciate a young helping hand for my desserts."

"You make desserts?" Her stomach growled again, but thankfully the noises in the kitchen muffled it.

"Yes, and I am very talented at serving them, too." Marilee smirked before releasing a laugh. "I'm just joking there. Not talented, but I do serve it, simply to hear the compliments from Lady Alondra. She loves my desserts."

All the amusement to hear Marilee chat with her so openly, just a newcomer, disappeared at the mention of that name. *Alondra*. Her younger cousin. Austrella wondered what she must look like now, because she was only five the last time she saw her.

Austrella was pulled out of her thoughts when the man from earlier called out to her saying, "You should be wise not to be friends with Marilee, Miss Austen, she's an *earbug*!"

The hardness in her chest eased and she smiled, almost widely, until she reminded herself not to.

Marilee rolled her eyes before dragging Austrella further into the kitchen.

"Maybe, Marilee, you should help Miss Austen find her position," Mrs. Wetmore called out from behind.

Her new friend replied something, but Austrella couldn't concentrate as she kept gazing at the food. She was so hungry that she could devour the whole kitchen if possible.

“Alright, Rella, let’s see what you can do. What are you interested in? Have you worked in a kitchen before? Or have you—”

“I could serve,” she blurted out, the desperation to see her family pumping in her blood. Serving was the quickest way to make her desire come true. “I-I mean, I have no experience but I... I could help you serve or bring your desserts.”

Marilee’s face burst with a smile. “That’s perfect! You, me, and the desserts—yes, we are going to be best friends!”

Austrella was touched. Living away from people in a small cottage in the woods, with only her parents and sometimes their enchanter friend to communicate with, she had forgotten how talkative people were. Not knowing how to respond, she just smiled wide before the warning bell rang in her head.

Don’t smile too much!

“Well, well, what do we have here?” a female voice rang out. The kitchen fell into a hush, and every head turned.

Austrella turned with them, and her eyes fell on a girl slightly older than herself. Her hands were on her hips as her gaze scanned the kitchen amusedly before walking in.

She looked familiar; her features seemed like a memory Austrella often remembered.

“Ah, my lady,” one of the cooks, a man with streaks of gray, said. “Such a rare blessing to have you here, like once in a year, if I’m not wrong. Lady Aquila, to what do we owe the pleasure?”

Aquila.

The name echoed in Austrella’s ears like a whisper from the past. Of course, it was Aquila, she knew it would be; her features seemed almost the same, but firmer. Austrella’s eyes grew wide at the confirmation she sought. It was her beloved cousin; one who had been like a sibling and her partner in crimes. To see her before her eyes felt surreal.

Aquila didn’t seem to notice Austrella as she walked to the tables lined up in the center. “You know I’m busy. And sadly, Alondra has no taste for the kitchen.”

“Ah, well, my lady, so glad you came. We could really use a hand here. Your graceful hand could make things get done like an enchantment,” the man said jokingly.

Eyes wide, Austrella watched her cousin move towards the table near her. A part of her prayed she wouldn't notice her, while the other prayed she would and recognize her—which wasn't possible now, no matter how close they were ten years ago.

"I'm flattered. However, as you know, I'm afraid I'm more talented at eating than cooking. And I give you my word to help you with it always."

A ripple of laughter spread through the kitchen, but Austrella didn't join them. She was stunned with disbelief at how Aquila had changed, how her cousin couldn't recognize her presence in the room.

Aquila leaned against a table, her eyes scanning the room; they landed on Austrella at last. Austrella stiffened as her cousin caught her gaze; she was so overwhelmed with several emotions that she couldn't even crack a smile.

Austrella selfishly prayed for her cousin's eyes to widen in shock and realization. But Aquila only smiled. "Who do we have here? A new face—or is it me who had been absent for a long time than I'd realized?"

Austrella's heart sank. She did *not* recognize her, not even a bit—her eyebrows would've furrowed in confusion if she had at least. But of course, that was what Austrella had wanted, her confidence in returning to Catsimoor. However, it wasn't easy to accept.

But, wasn't the sisterly bond they shared magical that it could make Aquila *feel* the truth? Unfortunately, no, it wasn't possible.

She was truly unrecognizable.

Austrella couldn't speak; her lips felt too numb to move. Mrs. Wetmore, who had been occupied by the preparations, soon came to her rescue. "Indeed, my lady. Allow me to introduce, Miss Austen, Rella, she is newly joined."

Austrella inclined her head respectfully, her posture stiff.

"Welcome, Rella, I hope you'll like it here," Aquila said. She shot her a warm smile before moving to the other table.

Aquila didn't recognize her! It struck her heart like a fiery arrow. Her eyes began to tear up, but she composed herself. She wouldn't cry, no matter how much it hurt, she wouldn't cry, because this was for the best.

Besides, Austrella couldn't blame her. Her changes weren't Aquila's fault.

Austrella observed her cousin's moves as Aquila tasted the food and made comments, filling the kitchen with laughter. She neared the table Austrella stood

by, where Marilee's desserts waited to be tasted, and raised a spoonful of dessert to her mouth.

A sliver light flashed. Austrella's gaze caught the silver bracelet around her cousin's wrist, a bracelet that held memories.

It was one of the twin bracelets Aquila had bought for them almost thirteen years ago. She had given one to Austrella while she wore the other herself. They had called it '*sister bracelets*' and promised each other not to take them off.

Austrella had never taken off hers. Now it seemed Aquila hadn't, either.

Austrella hid her right wrist behind her immediately. She hadn't expected to see Aquila still wearing it. Staring at the bracelet's slender chain around Aquila's wrist, memories of them admiring it and showing everyone around flashed in her mind. It reminded her of the bond they shared, what now seemed uncatchable like the air, as her cousin remained in the same room with her but didn't recognize her.

It was all the dark prince's fault. She clenched her jaw and averted her gaze.

Aquila left before long, and Austrella spent the next hours observing the staff working, talking, and making friends with them. Most of the staff was twice her age. Marilee and the man who called Marilee an earbug, Tom, were the only young ones.

Marilee was quite talkative, and Tom proved himself right. However, Austrella found her company refreshing and enjoyable.

Night arrived soon, and Austrella couldn't rest due to the anxiety of getting to see her family after a long time. Mrs. Wetmore granted her permission to help Marilee bring the desserts to the dining hall while Marilee would do the serving.

An hour before the dinner, Austrella found herself dressed in the servant's attire that would've made her mother cry in agony if she ever saw her.

She was never supposed to wear this, or even work as a servant.

Nevertheless, here she was, wearing a simple white garment of the servants' uniform with a black apron, balancing the tray of desserts as she made her way to the dining room.

Marilee was beside her, carrying another tray. She talked quietly on the way, and Austrella kept humming, nodding, and smiling to pretend that she was listening.

Before long, Austrella saw the open doors of the dining room and heard several voices coming from inside, as if everyone was talking at once. She heaved deep breaths as she neared where her family was.

She walked past the door with Marilee and into the expansive, though not as big as the castle's, dining room. The chandeliers above cast a warm and radiant light in the room like a thousand candles.

Austrella's eyes fell on the people seated around the table, their laughter and chatter filling the air. Her knees weakened when her eyes fell upon her uncle straight across the table. Her steps slowed while Marilee walked past her ahead in confidence.

Austrella wanted to catch up with her pace, pretending as if nothing affected her, except that it did.

Her eyes wandered around the table, taking in each person. She saw her cousin brother, her father's youngest brother's son who was three years older than her. She wouldn't have recognized him if she didn't know he would be here. He was quite changed, only some features remained the same.

She found her two aunts who were pleasantly conversing, and then found Aquila chattering with two girls younger than her. Austrella couldn't tell which one was Alondra and which was Luna, as both were quite unrecognizable to her.

There was a little girl, about six years old, beside Aquila. Austrella's heart almost crushed. Was there a cousin she never knew? Was she Aquila's sister or Luna's? She would have to ask Marilee for answers.

Austrella could hardly pluck her eyes off them as she forced herself to focus on her role. She moved towards the side of the table and placed the bowls on it off the tray. She raised her head once again, her eyes sweeping past each member and meeting the gaze of her grandfather who happily nodded to something his grandchildren happened to say.

Their gazes met, and she stiffened, heartache settling within her. But his eyes brushed past her. Her heart sank. Her grandfather didn't recognize her either. She had known he wouldn't, but the pain struck her heart like lightning.

Her grandmother was talking enthusiastically about how she almost broke her arm a week ago by falling off a horse. She spoke about the pain rather sarcastically and her grandchildren—except Austrella, of course—laughed. Her heart broke as they laughed; her eyes soaked with tears.

I'm Austrella! She wanted to shout out, to reveal herself, rush into her grandparents' arms and be welcomed back. But the cold reality didn't allow it.

She couldn't stand there, listening to their laughter any longer. She turned on her heels and walked to the door. Tears threatened to cram her eyes and she struggled to fight back her sobs.

No. She thought. *I shouldn't be feeling this.* She halted at the door to spare one more glance at her dining family. She was safe as long as no one recognized her. Maybe they would keep it a secret if they knew, but what if someone would overhear and spread the news? She couldn't risk her life, or her parents'.

On the bright side, if she were recognizable, she wouldn't have been able to be in Catsimoor now. Therefore, this pain was worth it.

Austrella pushed the pain aside and let the relief wash over her. Relief that she had now entirely confirmed that no one could recognize her. She could now confidently stay in her uncle's manor as a servant and see her family every day.

This way, she was safe, her parents were safe, and she could live in her country without fear. With a fake identity and a story that couldn't give away her true story.

CHAPTER 1 | CINDERS

Austrella's footsteps echoed through the dimly lit hallway as she walked to the room she shared with Marilee. Exhausted, she pushed open the door and walked in, the wooden floor creaking gently under her shoes.

Their room had simple fittings: two narrow beds on either side of the room against the walls and a small wooden table covered in a white cloth in a corner with candle stands. The small, single window in the room draped in faded curtains allowed a gap for moonlight to shine in.

Austrella quietly shut the wooden door behind her and leaned against it. Every day, working as a servant, was exhausting. She'd been tasked with several kinds of work since she couldn't find a suitable position. In fact, she was suited nowhere here.

Pulling the cap off her hair, she walked over to the table. Her eyes fell upon the mirror resting on its top and reached for it. With marks of countless touches, the shiny surface was a little unclear. Austrella took hold of the apron she hated so much and wiped the mirror with it.

She held the mirror before her face, the candlelight casting enough light to see her reflection. However, the one who stared back wasn't the girl she used to know and had wanted to remain.

Her face had lost its color; it looked like a ghostly apparition. She didn't look like herself.

There were ashes on her cheeks and her chin, her face completely dull. She had been working hours near the fire today, helping with cooking, but she didn't know she had cinders on her face as if someone had brushed it over her.

Disbelief claimed her features. She was horrified at the face that stared back. Who was she? She looked absolutely like a servant.

A lump formed in her throat and her fingers tightened around the mirror's frame. She touched her face in disbelief. This was not who she was supposed to be. Tears began to cram her eyes.

For goodness' sake, she was a princess! Now she looked like a disgusting figure.

No one would believe her if she went in this form and told them that she was the Princess Austrella the world believed to be dead along with her family.

Tears blurred her vision and she blinked to release them. They trailed down her cheek, clearing out the path through the layer of ashes.

She dropped the mirror on the table and closed her eyes as a sob escaped her. What had she become?

Austrella had come straight to her uncle's manor after leaving her parents, thinking that working as a servant was worth seeing her family. She thought she'd cross paths with her cousins at least twice a week, but now it had been a month since she arrived. Other than seeing her entire paternal family together on the first day, she'd seen only Aquila and Alondra after that. Though once.

She had waited and waited, but there was not even a glimpse of them. She should've known it wasn't possible since servants had a separate staircase and paths to use that the duke's family didn't. Well, there were some servants who saw the family and used their pathways every day, being their personal maids, usual servers, and cleaners. But Austrella wasn't one of them.

After the first day, she wasn't able to help Merilee serve the desserts again; Mrs. Wetmore tasked her with different types of work around the kitchen.

Yesterday, she was tasked with cleaning the drawing room, and on her way, and her aunt crossed paths with her. But the woman didn't even spare her a glance, walking past her as if she was invisible. Of course, Austrella should've known that servants were invisible; most of them.

And she was now one of them.

In fury, she had wet the floor of the drawing room with tears while cleaning.

Now seeing the cinder girl in the mirror, she wished things were easier like how she'd imagined them to be. Like, seeing Aquila every day, becoming friends with her, and being chosen as her handmaid. Now that she was one of the invisible ones, she wished she hadn't come here.

Today while cooking, not knowing how to manage the fire, several times she had wanted to throw away the spoon she held for hours and scream out that she was a princess—*the* princess.

This was all the dark prince's fault.

He, said to have dark powers, invaded her country with his father when she was only nine. The prince—who wasn't a prince then—attacked the castle, and her family had to flee. They hardly escaped the magical attacks; through a secret passageway, she and her mother had fled out of the castle to the woods while her father had promised to follow them right after he found her brother. But when her father reached them, he had been alone. He confessed heartbrokenly that he couldn't find Adam, and that the guard who helped him out saw someone capturing him.

Meaning, he was killed.

It was the most dreadful day in her life.

Austrella wondered if that guard was still alive. If so, why didn't he tell the people that the royal family had escaped? Or did he keep it a secret for their safety?

Nonetheless, everything was the dark prince's fault. He was the reason why she had a fake identity, a fake story that she was an orphan who lived in an orphanage until she was nineteen and was told to look after herself.

He was responsible for every horrible thing that had happened.

The sound of the door creaking open pulled her from her thoughts and she turned hurriedly to see Marilee enter. "I thought you must be asleep."

"No, I..." Austrella's voice was hoarse. She cleared her throat. "I need to get cleaned first." When her friend turned to close the door, she seized the chance to wipe away her tears. By doing so, her hands were dirtied with the ashes wiped off her face.

"Are you okay?"

Austrella stiffened. Luck wasn't on her side. She rubbed her hands on her apron before turning to see Marilee who had caught sight of her tears. When Marilee opened her mouth to speak, she cut in, "I am fine. Just a little tired."

Marilee frowned. She took a step forward. "You do not seem fine, Rella. If I am not wrong, you appeared quite dull today. What is bothering you?"

Austrella wrung her hands. She prepared herself to admit she wasn't alright. But it was best not to worry her friend about her situation. She shut her mouth and offered a small, strained smile instead. "Maybe I could use some distraction? Tell me something... something good."

Marilee appeared unconvinced with her answer for a moment before sighing. "Well..." Her eyes suddenly sparkled. "Did you hear about the ball? It is only a week and four days away."

Austrella raised her eyebrows. Was her uncle hosting a ball? How come she didn't know? "A ball?"

Her friend nodded enthusiastically. "Yes, the ball! I cannot believe it is closer than I thought. Of course, I should have remembered! It has been going like this for the last three years and this is the fourth year—of course, you know that."

Austrella grew nervous; she didn't know that. It would be alright if she said she didn't know, right? After all, not everyone could know about a ball the duke hosted.

"Duke Travis hosts a ball every year?"

Marilee's enthusiasm dropped. "Rella, it is not Duke Travis! He has not hosted a ball in years, b-but it is the prince—I mean, the king. The king is hosting it. Of course, you know that, don't you? Everyone knows that!"

Uh-oh. She had not a single idea about this ball the king hosted. It was not like she had her ears open for all conversation around her. She was least interested in gossiping. Her mother had strictly warned her not to gossip; it was not a princess thing.

"O-of course... yes... the ball, the king, yes." She put on a plastered smile. "Yes, I'm aware, but... you know, being in the orphanage, I had a lot of things to take care of and barely paid attention to the things around me, but I know the ball. The one the king hosts for the citizens, right?"

Marilee, who had looked convinced with her story at first, widened her eyes. "No, silly, not for the citizens! It's for his son, the prince!" She laughed.

Austrella grimaced. "The dark prince."

"Y-yes. The dark prince. Three years ago, the king hosted a ball for the prince to choose himself a bride from, but he did not—maybe because he did not like anyone, I do not know—therefore, from then on, a ball is hosted once in every year, until he chooses of course. However, he has not chosen a bride in three

years. It is the fourth year now. Everyone is talking about it. Every citizen is invited.”

How come she had missed it? The kitchen was practically filled with gossip, if she listened, she could hear the news around Catsimoor. Maybe she should keep one ear open.

“I heard that, once the prince picks a bride, he will become the king,” Marilee said.

Austrella snorted. He was the last one who deserved to be a king. However, it was funny and surprising that he didn’t make himself king when he had invaded her country, but only his father. She scrunched her nose. “But who would attend the dark prince’s balls?”

“At first, when it was announced, people were hesitant because you know why. Therefore, only the nobility attended. However, since the prince did not choose a bride then, the next year, the people were encouraged and a lot of them attended. He did not choose again, and it has encouraged more and more people to attend. Therefore, last year, thousands of people went, but yes, he still didn’t choose. People think he does not want to marry and he doesn’t seem like he would pick a bride at all. So, the people have been given a golden opportunity to go to the palace, and enjoy the whole grand event.”

Austrella pictured her castle—if it looked the same—lit with numerous lights at night and crowded with people. Her eyes suddenly widened with shock that transcended the disappointment she had endured previously.

The people have been given a golden opportunity to go to the palace...

Right! A golden opportunity. She’d been dying to see her home, at least from far away, but she hadn’t gotten the opportunity yet. Now the chance was here, a chance not just to *see* her home, but to go there.

Simply getting to see her home, from where she had to flee, was worth much more than working in her uncle’s manor in the hope of seeing her cousins.

She didn’t know her prayers would be answered so soon. A sudden thrill rippled through her.

Her mind raced with thoughts like leaves in a cyclone. Her dull blue eyes now lit as her voice spilled, “Marilee, do you think... do you think *we* could go? To t-the ball? Could we go?”

Marilee's smile fell, and her radiant face dimmed. "That's the problem. Rella, we can't go."

"Why not?"

"We're servants."

"But you said every citizen is invited, are they not?"

"Yes but—"

"We could go then," Austrella spoke hurriedly. "We both could go. We could request our payments early if it's possible and buy gowns, or we could borrow from someone!"

Marilee shook her head and her frown deepened. "Oh, Rella, I wish we could go, but we can't. You know how it is. We're servants."

She blinked in sheer disbelief. "So what? Are we not *humans*? Does the king not count servants as citizens?"

"No, not the king. Or the prince."

"Then who can stop us? We are not going to introduce ourselves as servants anyway." *And for goodness' sake, I'm the princess!*

"Rella," Marilee called, sighing wearily. "It's the duke. He doesn't allow us. Trust me, I tried the last two years, I tried. I asked the duchess for permission when I learned that the duke doesn't let his servants attend the royal ball. But the duchess declined, too. So we are hopeless."

Austrella's eyes were wide as she listened. "That's... that's ridiculous! I mean... this is..." She looked around as she searched for words before spitting out angrily, "Unfair! So unfair! Why doesn't he? We have our own will, our freedom, to go wherever we want."

"I don't know why. No one questions the duke, do they? And Rella, we don't quite have the free will, not when we work for him. He won't even give us a day off unless it's very important. I've heard the other nobles allow their servants, but Duke Travis..."

This is rubbish! Rubbish, rubbish, rubbish! She scowled. How could her uncle not let his humble servants go? How could he? How *dare* he! She curled her fingers into a fist. Whatever his reason was, she would go. This was her golden opportunity and she would not let her uncle ruin it.

No one could stop her from going to her home, where she truly belonged—even if it was invaded now.

Maybe she could request the early payment and make an excuse that it was for an important matter. Maybe she could...

"And no one can request early payments, by the way. It doesn't work. We get them only at the right time," Marilee said as if she read her thoughts. "Trust me, I've tried before."

Thus, her hope to get an early payment was shattered.

Frustration poured over her like rain and she failed to restrain a groan. What was wrong with her uncle? She had thought he was kind.

Nevertheless, her fire of longing and determination remained burning. She would not let anyone take away the chance that was within her hold.

The fire burned fiercely. She would find a way no matter what. Aquila was one of the ways she could try, and if that didn't work, she would find another way. *Anything* to see her home.

The next day, Austrella looked out for a chance to see Aquila. Maybe she could make Aquila convince her father to let his servants attend the ball. When the kitchen staff was occupied with their usual duties and conversations, she sneaked out of the kitchen to go and see her cousin. It was evening, and she was certain Aquila would be present in the manor. All she needed was to find her.

As she stepped out of the kitchen, her mind swirled with thoughts. Was it possible to approach Aquila without a reason such as bringing her something she asked for?

Though servants couldn't approach the duke's family casually, Austrella was going to try.

She moved past the servants' corridor, and the sound of footsteps made her turn to see a maid walking past her, carrying a glittering silvery tray with two glasses. The maid didn't seem to mind her as she walked ahead, but Austrella saw her; it was a woman in her early forties.

She drew a breath in realization; it was Aquila's handmaid.

An impulse tugged at her. Breath held, she summoned her courage and hurried towards the maid.

"Excuse me!"

The maid turned around quickly.

Oh Creator, help me. A nervous smile stretched on Austrella's lips as she offered, "Do you need any help with... with that?" She gentled her voice.

The maid smiled warmly. "Oh no, no dear, I can handle it."

Yes, you can handle it but I can handle it better. Austrella bit her lip in hesitancy, gathering her words to form another offer. The maid turned to walk away.

"Wait!" She hurried after her and the maid turned again, confused. She flashed a sweet smile to convince her. "I-I can help you. You look... you look so ill. I think you should get some rest."

The maid's eyes wrinkled as she smiled wide. "I truly appreciate your concern, Miss Austen, but I assure you, I am feeling quite well. As you see, I'm as healthy as a horse. No need to worry about me." She winked before turning on her heels.

Well, that didn't work. Why couldn't the woman just feel tired and pass the job to her? Austrella hesitated, her fingers twisting the corner of her apron. Not wasting time, she stepped forth in urgency again. "I just need to talk with Aquil—*Lady Aquila*, I mean."

The maid turned again, her eyebrows twitched this time. "What's it that you said, my dear?"

"I have to speak with Lady Aquila about something very important. And I can bring it to her if it's okay..."

"Oh." The woman's expression slid to uncertainty.

Oh, please, please say yes. Austrella's eyes pleaded with hers as she waited impatiently.

The woman's uncertainty melted into a tentative smile. "Of course then, here you go. I'm certain Lady Aquila would understand."

Relief rushed through her veins; a smile broke onto her face and Austrella nodded. She took the tray from the woman's hands carefully. Though the maid appeared hesitant, she allowed her anyway. The maid told her to bring it to Aquila's room, and Austrella set off. She knew the way to Aquila's room, and if she wasn't wrong, she remembered almost every way in the manor.

Austrella reached at Aquila's door in no time. When she lifted her hand to knock, a murmur of voices drifted from inside the room. One of the voices belonged to Aquila; the other was a familiar feminine one, but she couldn't quite

place it. She was about to dismiss it and knock, not wanting to eavesdrop on her cousin, when Aquila's words echoed through the door and caught her attention.

"Remember the balls we had when Uncle Truficas was the king? Of course, you don't, you were little then. It used to be so much fun. The balls were Austrella's favorite. She used to love them so much."

Austrella's hand froze in midair as her name emerged from Aquila. A name she thought had been silenced, as she'd heard no one saying it until now.

She neared the door, carefully.

"I wish I remembered," the familiar voice said, quieter than Aquila's, and Austrella realized it was Alondra. She recalled hearing her voice when she had crossed paths with the sisters the last time.

"Austrella and Adam were extremely interested in doing pranks, and eventually I became too. And there was this—oh! Oh my, that day when we almost embarrassed our papa... I could never forget that day!"

"You embarrassed Papa?"

"By rubbing the cream from the cake on his back! He didn't notice at all! And when one of the people pointed out... *oh!* The look on his face was hilarious! Even now, he doesn't know who did it." The sisters burst into a fit of laughter.

Once after their laughter died out, Aquila said, "I miss her." Her voice turned sad. "We were like sisters..."

"I know."

"She didn't deserve it. Death was the last thing she deserved... I know years have passed, but it still hurts. Sometimes I wish it wasn't true, if she's still out there somewhere, but... it still hurts that she's gone. All of them."

"I know, but—"

"Which is why I don't want to go to the ball of the person who killed our cousins—our family," Aquila admitted bitterly. "But Papa is infuriating—"

"It's for our lives," Alondra interjected. "If we don't side with the prince, then you know our fate. So we have to do it no matter what."

"But I hate it!" Aquila's sorrowful voice echoed. "Oh, Alona, I wish we hadn't lost them... I wish it wasn't real. Or at least, I wish we could rewind it. I honestly would do anything if I could change the past. Ella was a part of my life, and emptiness without her remains. She was the sister I had before you. She was... ugh! You have no idea how much I wish to confront the prince. And the king—"

"I think it's best if we don't talk about this. It's dangerous," Alondra said with a note of fear.

"As if the dark prince is at the door."

The conversation continued behind the door, but Austrella couldn't concentrate on it any longer. Her heart swelled with emotions too powerful to contain. Tears crammed her eyes, threatening to fall. She didn't know she still meant a lot to Aquila, and that her departure had such an impact on her.

If only her cousin knew she was right here at her door, alive, hearing every word she said.

She was caught between the desire to burst through the door to reveal herself and the secrets she must keep safe. Invisible chains held her back from the desire.

She stood there for a moment, her throat tight. Their conversation reached her ears once again but she refused to listen; it would only tempt her more to reveal herself, which she mustn't do.

Austrella wiped away her tears before summoning the courage to knock. She closed her eyes and breathed in deeply. Her fingers met the door hesitatingly.

The sisters' voices went silent. For a moment, there was no response. When she was about to knock again, Aquila's voice called out, "Come in!"

Austrella pushed open the door and entered with the tray held tight. The room was just as big as she remembered. Before her eyes could wander around, she saw Aquila and Alondra sitting on the bed. They both appeared relieved when their gazes met Austrella's as if they had thought she was the dark prince himself.

A lump formed in her throat at the sight of her cousins. Oh, how she wished to reveal herself to them! "I brought your... drinks." She forced a smile, walking towards them.

"Oh, I wasn't expecting you, Miss Austen!" Aquila smiled cheerfully, climbing down from her bed. Her cheerfulness only pained Austrella's heart more. "You can place them here, thank you." She gestured to a table near the bed.

Austrella managed to force a smile again and placed the glasses on the table from the tray.

"I hope the others are not giving you a hard time here," Aquila said. "You know, some have the ability to tease you to death."

Austrella wasn't amused; all she could think was pulling her cousin into a tight embrace and telling her that she was alive, that she had never been truly lost. Again, she forced a quick smile. "Yes, I quite agree with you, but they are really nice to me."

"That's good to know."

A pause lingered between them. Austrella knew she was supposed to make her leave without being asked. When Aquila opened her mouth to say something, Austrella beat her up to it. "There is something I would like to ask you, my lady."

It felt weird to call her cousin *my lady*.

"What is it?"

Austrella took a deep breath, tension filling her voice as she began, "I was wondering if... if I could go to the ball the king is hosting." There it was. It was not as hard as she feared it would be to ask from a servant's position.

"Oh." Aquila appeared taken aback before her expression turned somber. "Oh, I'm... I'm sorry to tell you that it gets decided by the duke. He doesn't permit the... the servants to attend the ball."

Austrella's heart sank. She had anticipated this response, but it displeased her as if it were trying to ruin her chance to see her home. "But every citizen is invited, everyone can go," she said matter-of-factly. "The king never said servants are an exception."

Aquila frowned. "I'm sorry, but it's the duke's order."

"But why? Can you not convince him?" Would a servant ask like that? She didn't know. At the moment, she didn't care.

Her cousin blinked, surprised again. She answered with her head raised. "I'm sorry but I can't. It is what he has decided. Now, you may return to your work."

Austrella clenched her jaw. She felt a surge of frustration and anger. It was not the first time she was treated like a servant, and definitely not the last. She hated every bit of it.

Her face didn't conceal the displeasure she felt. Clenching her jaw hard to hold back the emotions that threatened to spill forth, she gave a curt nod. She didn't bother to curtsy as she walked away. Maybe she was the only one who hadn't curtsied to the duke's daughters before.

Curling her fingers, she stopped at the door and turned. The princess inside her urged her to say, "I must admit this, my lady." The sisters' eyes turned to her. "It seems like the king has a bigger heart than the duke has."

Then she walked away without even bothering to close the door. She wondered what must've been their reaction as she didn't wait a second to see it. Whatever it was, she didn't care.

She pushed down her disappointment, remembering her determination. She would find a way no matter what. She held her head high, her gaze fixed on the path ahead, making a silent promise to herself.

A promise that, she would get herself to the ball no matter what.

CHAPTER 2 | UNEXPECTED

Austrella dipped her quill into the inkwell and began to write.

Dear Pama,

A mischievous smile widened her lips, mirth filling her eyes as she wrote the fake name meant for her parents. She hadn't written to her parents since she came to Catsimoor. They had told her to write only if it was important, for their safety.

And since learning about the ball that she desired to attend but couldn't find a way to do so, she found it was important to write to them about it. Besides, she'd missed them.

The letter could only be sent to the enchanter's address. He was the only friend they had. Lorcan, a not-so-powerful enchanter, was the one who had found Austrella and her parents in the woods when they fled their castle. Knowing the danger the royals were in, he decided to help them and keep them safe. He brought them to a faraway country, as it would be dangerous if people recognized them, and they took shelter in the woods where no other human came. They had lived in a tent for weeks until Lorcan built a small, wood cottage for them.

Neither Austrella nor her parents ventured out of the woods. Instead, Lorcan brought them everything they needed and kept them secret.

The news about the dark prince's invasion had reached every corner of the world, so Lorcan had passed on every piece of information he got from the nearest town. He was the one to tell them that the dark prince was from Catsimoor's enemy and neighboring country called *Alentia*, and that his father was now the king.

As Austrella grew up, her parents wanted her to live her life. They referred to going to the town, finding a job, a husband, and living there. However, Austrella

decided to return to Catsimoor. Her parents were hesitant at first, but they granted her permission later, saying that it was where she truly belonged.

I hope you are well. There is a lot to tell you, but for now, I will keep it short. I'm doing alright here, and when I say I'm alright here, you know it's not true. It is really hard to accept this new life and my work, but I will get used to it, I pray. I don't get to see them as much as I thought I would, but things don't always work as we want them, right? However, the people here are nice.

The reason I'm writing to you is that there's a ball at the palace next week. Everyone is invited and I want to go there and see the palace. This is my chance, I've been longing to see the castle for a long time and now is the chance. But the problem is that the duke doesn't let his servants attend the ball. I don't know why but that's the way it is here. I tried talking with ~~Aquila~~ Lady Aquila, but it didn't work. I tried thinking of many ways to attend the ball, but I have no more ideas. I really want to go, and I don't understand why he doesn't let the servants attend. I don't have a way before me, and I don't know what to do. Perhaps I can sneak out of here, but I don't have a gown and I don't see a way to get one. I know you can't do anything from there, but I know hearing back from you would help me.

I wish I could write more, but it's better if I don't. I hope you are well. I truly miss you so much and hope to see you soon. Often I have considered returning to you, but this country is holding me back. However, I believe the Creator will make a way for us to reunite and be together once again. I love you so much that I want to run back to you. I hope this letter will reach you safely.

Love,

Ella

Austrella wanted to write more, share her sorrows, and everything that had happened since she arrived here, but for safety reasons, she couldn't. What if the letter reached the wrong hands? She couldn't risk it.

When she had started paying attention to the conversations around her, Austrella had overheard Mrs. Wetmore mention that her nephew was heading to Westlock. When Austrella asked her if he could deliver a letter to a friend in Westlock for her, Mrs. Wetmore agreed.

Austrella shoved aside the disappointment of not being able to write more and went to Mrs. Wetmore, handing over the letter.

She didn't know how long it would take for her parents to receive it. Maybe a week or two. She could only hope it wouldn't take a month.

Austrella loved her parents. But she came to realize how much they meant to her only when she came to Catsimoor. Every time she smiled wide, she remembered her mother's warning, and every time she was serious, she remembered her father's words.

"Now, listen carefully. No matter what, promise me, you will not smile wide," her mother said seriously, clasping her hands on Austrella's shoulders. "Because, my dear, you have my smile." She couldn't hold seriousness any longer as a smile claimed her lips. "And you shall not give away any clue, alright?"

Between her tears, Austrella rolled her eyes, laughing with her mother. "Oh, stop it, Mama, I have my own smile," she retorted playfully. But she knew her mother was right.

"And don't forget, young lady," her father, standing beside her mother, began with twinkles in his eyes. "Never look serious. Never ever. Because you would look exactly like your papa when you do." He was sarcastically serious.

More tears welled up in her eyes but she couldn't stop herself from laughing. She couldn't deny him, he was right too.

"Oh, quiet, you." Her mother narrowed her eyes at him. "She has taken nothing else from you than your eyes."

"Mama, I can't take anyone's eyes!" She gasped in a fake shock before chuckling with her father.

"Oh no, darling, she looks like me when she's serious. Why, she looks like me all the time."

"We both know what a lie it is. We both knew she'd look like me when she grows up."

"Which has not happened yet."

"And it is not my fault your eyes still show you the little Ella."

"My—"

"Oh, stop it both of you," Austrella interrupted, hardly holding back her amusement. "Promise me you will not argue with each other while I'm away."

"Of course, darling, we promise you."

"Oh, Ella dear, you know your papa and mama never argue."

Austrella rolled her eyes. “And we all know that isn’t true.” She shared a laugh with her parents. As much as she hated their arguments—some serious and some very silly—she was going to miss them.

“Rella, could you pass me the eggs?”

Austrella gasped slightly when one of the maid’s voices snapped her back into reality. It was not the first time she was lost in a memory and someone pulled her into reality. It was definitely not the last.

“Um, did you say something?”

Getting lost in her thoughts was a usual thing for Austrella. It happened often during her work and her friends had begun teasing her about it. She was already annoyed with the gossip in the kitchen, and when they began teasing her, the annoyance increased.

As each day passed, she wondered if her parents received the letter. Then she learned from Mrs. Wetmore that it would take nearly a week to reach Westlock. She wanted to hear from them before the ball, hoping it might ease her disappointment of not being able to attend it; therefore, she was doomed to know she wouldn’t.

As days passed and no ways unfolded, Austrella grew more frustrated. The only way to make the duke agree was by revealing herself to him, but sadly, she couldn’t do that.

Finally, the day of the ball arrived. The kitchen was filled with talk about the ball, the palace, the royals, and the nobles. It was infuriating. She spoke less that day, even to Marilee, in the frustration of being unable to attend the ball.

The chance had been in her hands, and her uncle had crushed it.

When night arrived, Austrella wanted nothing more than to go to bed and sleep, which was the only way to stop pondering. When she was washing dishes—the last duty of that day—a maid entered the kitchen, saying, “The duke and his family left for the palace just now!”

Austrella grunted in annoyance. The palace was the last thing she wanted to hear about now.

“Oh, did you see them? Did you see their gowns?” one of them asked interestedly.

“Did the duke wear a gown?” Tom asked, carelessly loud.

Ever since he had begun teasing her, Austrella had been annoyed by his jokes. But now his sarcastic words made her lips quirk up as a picture of her uncle wearing a gown formed in her mind. She tried not to laugh.

“Careful what you’re saying!” an older maid admonished him.

Tom laughed.

“The ladies looked absolutely fabulous. I have never seen such beautiful gowns before. Truly masterpieces!”

Austrella frowned. A longing rose in her heart along with envy. How many people were out there, able to wear a gown and attend the ball when she, the princess, had no gown, no permission to attend it, but stayed behind and worked in the kitchen?

Tears gathered at the corners of her eyes. *Oh Creator, don’t You see me?*

“Miss Austen!”

Austrella flinched at the loud voice calling her. Her hands paused scrubbing and she turned to see a man at the entrance, his eyes on her. “Y-yes?”

“Could I have a moment please?”

She blinked in surprise. Was he going to deliver to her a word from the duke? Was he going to fire her for the blunt words she had told Aquila that day? “Of course.”

Washing her hands and drying them in her apron—a likely habit—she hurried to him. He didn’t pay attention to the servants who had fallen unusually silent, probably to listen to whatever he had to say to Austrella.

Heart pounding fast, Austrella approached him. “What is it?”

“There’s someone waiting for you, Miss Austen, in the stables,” the man said, his voice so quiet. “A visitor.”

A visitor? In the stable? There was no one to pay her a visit unless someone came to know about her, which wasn’t possible at all. “Who is it?” she asked eagerly.

“He said he’s a friend of yours, named Lorcan Gliderbrok.”

Austrella’s breath hooked, and she stared at him with eyes wide. “Lorcan?” She was confused, nevertheless, surprised. What brought him here to see her? “Could you please lead the way?”

The man nodded and turned to walk, gesturing to her to follow him. She took off the apron and threw it upon a table before hurrying after him.

He led her out through the servants' door. Soon, they arrived at the stables, and her eyes landed on a tall man in dark robes standing before it, his hands clasped before him. The lanterns outside the stable cast a warm and golden glow that gave her a clear view of her visitor's face. It was indeed Lorcan.

Austrella left the man's side and hurried towards Lorcan in surprise. Lorcan was around her father's age, his dark hair and beard touched by the silvery strands of age. She didn't miss the smile on his face as their eyes met.

"What a surprise to see you, Ella," Lorcan greeted her when she approached him; a playful smile lit his face.

Austrella couldn't help her smile, joy burst in her heart to see someone who knew the real her. Overall, he was like a godfather to her. "Is it really a *surprise* when you've come to see me yourself?" She threw her arms around him. The old man returned the hug, patting her back. "What are you doing here?"

Lorcan pulled away and gazed at the man behind them, a short distance away. She followed his gaze and found the man heading back.

"I came as soon as your parents received the letter."

She blinked at him. "What? Why—I mean...—"

"Austrella, listen." Her heart raced in thrill of being called by her true name, but it faded when she saw the urgency in his eyes. "Your parents and I want your desire to be done because you deserve it. Therefore, I traveled here as soon as I could. Now listen carefully, there's no time left. Your mother has entrusted me to give you something, and I'm here to give you that."

A sense of bewilderment washed over her. "W-what is it?"

His eyes held secrecy. "Something your parents entrusted me with years ago, something your mother managed to grab before running away, something that is important to her."

"Is that a riddle?"

Lorcan chuckled deeply. "No, my dear. You might know the story of how your mother went to the ball your father had hosted and they met, right?"

Austrella knitted her brows together. "I know that they met at a ball, but not *how* she attended it," she spoke, trying to remember if her mother had told her anything else. In one of their days in Westlock, her mother had told her how they met. But since their castle, their home, was so much involved in the story, she

never completed it, always ending up in tears. “Mama had hard times recalling memories, so she didn’t.”

“Did she ever mention glass slippers?”

“Glass slippers?”

Lorcan’s hand disappeared into the folds of his robes, and when he pulled his hands out, he was holding a pair of glass slippers that glittered like stardust. The slippers gleamed in the lantern’s light, their surfaces capturing the starlight’s essence. It was nothing like the slippers she’d seen or imagined—these ones appeared magical.

Austrella gasped in awe, her eyes widening in disbelief. She opened her mouth to speak but words didn’t come out.

“These are enchanted slippers made by your maternal grandmother. Everything else you need to know is in this...” Lorcan trailed off as he pulled out a letter from his robes. “Your mother has written everything you need to know here. You must read now, for time is ticking away fast.”

With a gentle smile, he passed the letter carefully into her hands.

Austrella’s heart rate quickened. She had had no hope of hearing from her parents this soon or finding a way to attend the ball—though she didn’t understand what those slippers were for when she didn’t have a gown.

The parchment felt cool against her fingertips. She broke the seal and opened it hurriedly. Her eyes fell on her mother’s beautiful writing, and as she began reading it, she could imagine her mother’s voice.

My dearest Ella,

How good it is to hear from you. It was as if I could hear your voice through your words. Your papa and I were so surprised to receive your letter. We are overjoyed because we miss you every second. It was disappointing to know it was short, but we know the risks, so we understand. Do they treat you well? What work did you get there? Did you make any friends? Do you have a good room to sleep in? I hope you still remember not to smile wide and not to look too serious (for your papa’s sake). Were you able to talk with any of your cousins? Were you able to see anyone else? How is Catsimoor now? Did you hear anything about the dark prince? We are dying to hear more from you.

We both understand how desperate you are to see our home, I long for it every day, and I simply cannot imagine your situation of being unpermitted from seeing the

place where you truly belong. Your papa was enraged to know that his brother is not letting you go, I can't deny I am angry as well. You deserve to have a chance to see it, and I understand your feelings. Which is why Lorcan has now come to you.

I know I should have told you about the slippers before. It was made by my mother, as you know well that she is an enchantress. When your father hosted that fateful ball all those years ago, I dreamed of nothing but attending and enjoying a moment at the castle, but you know, my family was poor and I did not have a proper gown to wear. On the night of the ball, when I was devastated, my mother came and gifted me these enchanted glass slippers. She had been working on them ever since we heard about the ball and I had began rambling how much I wanted to go. That is how I attended the ball and caught your father's attention.

Now, once you wear both slippers, the enchantment will begin and transform your dress into a gown you could not even imagine. It will transform you into a princess, the princess you truly are, and that is why your father and I want you to have this chance and go to the ball. We might not be able to see our home again, but this is your chance to see it and enjoy the ball, looking like the princess you really are. It is such a relief that you are so changed and no one will recognize you.

Now, you must not tell anyone of this, this must be a secret. You must keep the slippers safe and hidden from others. One thing you must know is that, if one slipper is off, the enchantment will only last another one minute before it will wear off.

That is all you need to know. I wish to tell you more, but I'm certain Lorcan will reach you only on the night of the ball and you need to hurry. I hope to hear from you if it is possible. We shall be waiting.

Enjoy the ball, my dear. Who knows, maybe you will catch the eyes of a good man and will be able to settle down. Let the merciful Creator make it happen. That is the main reason why we think this is important. We want your future to be secure and beautiful. I am pretty sure you are going to capture someone's heart tonight.

Write to us as soon as you find that man.

Love,

Your beloved mama.

CHAPTER 3 | SLIPPERS

Happy tears glistened in Austrella's eyes and her heart swelled with joy to hear from her mother.

She thanked the Creator for answering her prayers. She had given up hope of attending the ball; this way was beyond her wildest imagination.

She looked up at Lorcan and saw him smiling. Gratitude shimmered in her eyes. "Thank you."

"No mention, my dear." His gaze held a warmth that reminded her of her father. "Now, you should hurry up because you must reach the ball in time, Princess. Here," he said and lent the glass slippers to her, holding them carefully. "They're yours now."

Austrella took the shining slippers from him and cradled them delicately to her heart, afraid they might break if she held any tight. She wondered how she would wear them when they looked like they might break easily.

The fabled glass slippers' material was white crystal-like, sparkling all over. They looked as if they had come straight out of a dream. Breathlessly, Austrella examined the delicate and slender heels that shone like captured starlight.

Staring at the slippers, she couldn't believe this was actually happening, that they were about to get her to the ball.

She kept smiling until a certain question popped up in her head. Her eyes shot to Lorcan who watched her with a smile. "But how can I go? I mean, I can't walk on my feet—wearing these especially—all the way to the palace, can I?"

The enchanter raised an eyebrow with a teasing smile. "Do you realize that we are standing outside a stable?"

Austrella rolled her eyes. "Of course, I know that because I'm not blind. But come on, be serious, just because we are near a stable doesn't mean we can take a

horse from here. Just like we can't take anything from a house that's not ours just because we're standing near it."

Lorcan shook his head as he laughed. "But must not your uncle be inconvenienced for not permitting his workers to go to the ball?"

"But wouldn't Uncle be displeased that I took his horse without his permission?"

Lorcan waved his hand dismissively. "Oh, fret not, Ella, since he has left already, he would not see you. You simply must return before he does, and no one would know, unless the guards inform him, yes. But let's hope they won't doubt when they see you all dressed up for the ball. Besides, no one is going to stop you from fulfilling your dream. I know you wouldn't let them," he said with a note of certainty. "Now, hurry, come inside. No one must see it."

Austrella smiled with gratitude. She entered the stables with Lorcan, and the horses shifted and settled in their stalls. Thrill and anticipation tingled in the quiet air as she took a deep breath and slid her foot into one of the magical slippers. It fit her perfectly.

The moment she put on the second one, the slippers emanated a soft, white glow.

Austrella gasped. Her eyes snapped to Lorcan who chuckled at her astonishment and then gazed back at the glow.

Her heart raced with wonder as the glow wrapped around her, like tendrils of starlight weaving a dance of magic. The soft radiance enveloped her body, igniting a tingling sensation that sent shivers down her spine. The light was so bright for her that she shut her eyes in haste; still, she saw it through her closed eyelids.

A power surrounded her, and in the embrace of the ethereal glow, Austrella felt her hair untying, and her servants' clothing replaced by something soft and slightly heavy.

The magic around her fled and the light dissipated in the next moment. Austrella's eyes flung open, her heartbeat pulsing in her ears. She met Lorcan's gaze; they were filled with awe. She immediately looked down at herself and her breath hitched as she saw that she was wearing a white gown that seemed to be spun from moonbeams and stardust.

The white gown cascaded like a waterfall around her, festooned with delicate embroidery. The gown hugged her curves; it had slender sleeves that felt soft against her skin. She smoothed her hands down the fabric, touching them as if they were made of wonder. She had never seen such a beautiful gown as this.

"I can't believe this." Tears gathered in the corner of her eyes. It felt like a dream. Like a fantasy that could never be real. But it was real. This was happening; she was going to the ball in this beautiful gown. She was more than certain that she looked like the princess she was.

Austrella touched her dark hair carefully, which now hung graciously with some parts intricately braided. She couldn't see how it looked, but she knew it was beautiful. Between her tears, a huge smile broke onto her face and she looked at Lorcan.

He looked as proud as her father would have been if he saw her now.

"I can't believe this!" A laugh of disbelief and unadulterated joy escaped her lips and she twirled around, the gown swirling around her. "Oh Creator, I can't believe this at all!" She twirled once again, laughing with the enchanter, and rushed to him, throwing her arms around him. "Oh, thank you so much! I... I don't have words."

He caught her and returned the hug, stroking her hair gently. He was like a godfather to her, loving, caring, and a hundred times better than her actual godfather was. "There is no need to thank me, my dear. This is who you really are, who you are supposed to be. I thank the Creator for blessing me, and giving me the opportunity to see the princess looking like the princess."

"You came all the way here to fulfill my desire, and how can I not thank you? This is—wait." She pulled away to see his face and raised a suspicious eyebrow. "This is not entirely about fulfilling my desire, is it?"

Lorcan began to laugh.

"Come on, tell me!" she urged him. "Is this about what my mama said in the letter, about finding a man and settling down?" She narrowed her eyes playfully.

She knew the answer already. And that was a yes.

"Let's say, that is the main reason, but not the entire reason." Lorcan winked, and then laughed as she rolled her eyes.

"I can't marry anyone when I can't reveal myself," Austrella said, the playfulness subsiding. "I can't marry someone when all I can tell them about

myself is a lie. You know it's all lies that I have brought to this life with me." She frowned.

"Hey, hey, now is not the time to frown, Ella," Lorcan said softly. "You do not have to worry about it now. Who knows, maybe the Creator will give you someone you can share the truth with. But now is not the time to worry about this. Just go and enjoy the ball, and be happy, that's all we want."

A small smile lit her face. Sighing, she nodded.

"You look radiant, exactly like a princess."

"Because I *am* a princess."

Lorcan chuckled. "Of course, you are. And your parents must see this, Austrella. They will be so proud."

Austrella sighed longingly before stepping away. "Please tell them I miss them."

"I will."

"Wait, there is something I need to ask." She knitted her brows together. "I know my grandmother is an enchantress, but I was told that enchanters cannot do big enchantments like this... so how did she do it?"

"Enchanters *can* do big enchantments, but they are dangerous to our health. Which is why we have limits. If we use our gift past the limit, it would cost us too much strength. Making this gown cost your grandmother plenty of strength, and she no longer has enough strength to do any enchantment—your mother said so. But she was willing to go past the limit for her daughter's future."

Austrella's heart moved. Her grandmother did it for her mother's future. Now her mother had sent the slippers for *her* future. But she didn't want to find a man when her identity was a secret she couldn't spill.

"Now, you must hurry, my dear. I am certain the palace awaits its Princess."

Lorcan opened one of the stalls and brought out a majestic white horse, its coat shimmering like freshly fallen snow. Austrella admired the horse in awe, its skin as white as her gown.

Lorcan patted on the horse's flank and glanced at her. "Your journey awaits. Time is running out, hurry now, my dear."

"Are you going to leave now? Wait—how did you come here? Did you travel here on your horse?"

“That is correct; yes I did. But, Princess, you must hurry up. We will meet again, I promise.”

After exchanging a few words to convey to her parents, Austrella grasped the saddle’s pommel and climbed atop the horse carefully, who adjusted its stance when she did. She grabbed the reins confusedly. “I don’t remember how to ride a horse.”

Austrella had ridden horses a decade ago, but the memory wasn’t etched in her mind. Lorcan gently gave her instructions, step by step.

Heaving a deep breath, she nodded, courage and confidence unfurling in her. “Thank you for everything, Lorcan. Please pray for me, I hope everything will go well.”

“It will. Now, if you hurry, you might catch the tail of a carriage and follow it to the palace.”

Her heart jumped in exhilaration, surpassing the anxiety. With a final nod of appreciation, she curled her fingers tightly around the reins and took another deep breath. Lorcan walked out of the stables and looked around before glancing back at her.

“The coast is clear, you must go now.” He walked back in. “Do not fret about anything, Ella, for the Creator has your destiny in His hands. Now go, we will meet again.”

“We will meet again,” she repeated, flashing him a final dimpled smile. Then she glanced at the path ahead. “I can do this,” she muttered to herself before she nudged the horse out of the stables.

Austrella took one last glance at Lorcan before the horse ventured into the night that awaited her. Her heartbeat echoed in a matching rhythm with the hoofbeats beneath her as she urged her companion forward.

Austrella guided the horse through the manor’s yard to the frontage where the gate stood open between protective walls around. Two men guarded it, but they didn’t question her as she passed through the iron gates. Soon, the towering wall retreated and a cobblestone road stretched ahead, curving in the right direction that she recalled to be the route to the palace. Trees lined either side of the path, making it appear darker, and she was grateful for the soft moonlight illuminating her way.

The night air was alive with the soft rustle of leaves. Austrella nudged her horse into gallop fast, and the world passed by her sides in a blur, the wind blowing on her face.

Having not ridden horses in ten years, panic rose in her at the speed and she tightened her grip on the reins, leaning forward slightly to find balance. Fear of falling and dirtying her gown flashed in her eyes, and then she felt herself tipping slightly to the side. She wished she hadn't urged it to run fast. She considered pulling the reins but as a picture of the horse rearing up and her falling flashed before her eyes, she didn't want to take the risk. But as she felt herself tipping more, she realized she had no choice.

Careful, Austrella pulled the reins scarcely and the horse slowed a little. This fast was convenient, she believed, and relaxed into the saddle, her fingers now holding the reins with newfound confidence. Once she was seated securely, she steadied herself and blew out a breath.

I can do this.

Briefly glancing up at the gleaming moon and then to the path, suddenly, a flicker of light caught Austrella's attention—a carriage's lanterns.

You might catch the tail of a carriage...

She squinted and saw a carriage far ahead of her. A smile crept to her face, relaxing even more. She guided her horse to follow the carriage's trail, seeing it taking a turn. When they neared the carriage, a deep sigh escaped her lips.

This still felt surreal. Austrella couldn't believe she was on her way to the castle. She couldn't believe any of this.

The road between the woods twisted and turned. The journey continued. After a few minutes, the woods on either side ended as the road stretched to a clearing. When she reached the end of the woods, the castle came into view, its majestic structure standing against the starlit sky.

Austrella pulled the reins as suddenly as her eyes fell upon the building she once called home. Her horse halted, while the carriage rode ahead to the road that led to the bridge connecting the castle.

Breath hooked, jaw dropped, she stared at her—now invaded—home, after a long ten years. The castle was lit with numerous lights, shining goldenly vibrant against the night. When she had lived here, never once had she paused to appreciate or even notice the beauty of her home.

Until now.

The castle stretched out before her like a magnificent giant, the protective walls around the palace decorated with countless lights that twinkled like golden stars. Austrella could hardly believe this was where she had once lived. Where she was born and where she belonged.

A lump formed in her throat. Tears rushed into her eyes. Memories flashed in her mind, bringing more tears.

She wished to take back her conquered country, to save her people. The realization that she was now the crown princess, because her brother was gone, hit her harder. She must save her country, but she didn't know how.

Austrella stayed there for a moment, heart drenched in desperation, eyes filled with tears as she stared at the castle, flashbacks of her old days filling her head.

It was impossible to overthrow the dark prince and take back her country. She wasn't even here for that. She had come just to see her home by attending the ball. There was nothing else she could do.

Austrella stroked the horse gently and leaned down near its ear. "You see the castle there, my friend? That's where I lived, where I belong, and where you need to take me."

The carriage she was following long disappeared into the palace grounds. Stroking the horse once more, she urged him towards the bridge that brought back so many memories. Her tears were on the brink of spilling, and she tried not to think any of it, especially about her brother.

She rode through the gates and into the grand courtyard of the palace where a decorated fountain stood. No matter how much she remembered this place like the back of her hand, it still left her awed at its opulence and beauty.

There weren't many people outside, and Austrella assumed that most people had already arrived. As the carriage that was stopped before the grand staircase moved away, she halted her horse at the same spot. She hopped down carefully, all while scanning the courtyard she had missed beyond measure. A guard stepped forward and led her horse away.

Austrella stared up at her old home, breathing the welcoming air. *I'm here*, she longed to say it aloud and closed her eyes for a moment, feeling as though the palace was welcoming her back with open arms.

With one glance down at her enchanting gown and taking a deep breath, Austrella ascended the stairs leading to the palace's entrance. Each step made her realize this was real. She had returned to her home at last, even if it was just for the night.

Austrella passed through the large doors and stepped inside, the world shifting immediately. The interior stretched endlessly, the grandness of the space festooned with rich decorations that glimmered in the soft, golden-like illumination. Once again, she was awestruck. She had thought that the current king must have made changes to both the outdoors and interior, but he hadn't; it looked all the same.

Austrella whirled around as she examined the ceiling. Several chandeliers hung above and their light reflected on the polished floors. As she wandered further in, a hum of music and chatter reached her ears, and the awe was instantly replaced with anxiety. She came across a few people on her way who moved slower than her, examining each portrait hanging on the wall.

Suddenly, her wandering eyes fell upon two ladies in a corner ahead, talking giddily. One of them was Aquila, while the other was unfamiliar.

Austrella's steps faltered. Trepidation froze her. She knew her uncle and his family was here but she had completely forgotten about making up an excuse to tell them.

Aquila would recognize her. What would she tell them about the gown since she mustn't mention the enchanted glass slippers? Austrella considered turning back and waiting outside until Aquila went away, but she was too late.

Just as she was about to turn back, Aquila's eyes met hers, the smile on her face faltering. Austrella's heart sank when her cousin excused herself from the other lady and marched towards her.

"Rella? What are you doing here?" Aquila's voice held a sharp edge and a note of confusion, her eyes traveling to her dress. "How did you get here?"

Austrella's tongue stumbled over words. "I-I came... for the ball."

"The ball?" Aquila furrowed her eyebrows. "You know you can't be here. You must head back before the duke sees you."

Austrella's tension decreased as her frustration surged up. "And I don't see why I cannot."

Aquila rolled her eyes before eyeing her gown with a raised eyebrow. “Did you *steal* that dress, Rella?” she asked seriously.

“What? No!” Austrella protested, her voice tense, as she hadn’t forged an excuse yet. “I-I didn’t steal it.”

“Look, I understand you want to be here and I wish you could, but the duke doesn’t like it. He has a very good reason, so I suggest you leave. I’ve tried convincing him a hundred times for my friends who work for us, but my father strictly doesn’t allow it, so there is nothing I or you can do. You must return if you don’t wish to be fired.”

“But I had to come, I *wanted* to come.”

Aquila narrowed her eyes, her suspicion unmistakable. “Where did you get this dress from?”

“I bought it with the money I had saved,” Austrella blurted out.

“I mean no offense, but this gown is nothing like I’ve seen before and is not something you can afford.”

Austrella’s shoulders slumped. Right. She should’ve thought of it before saying so. “I—”

“Are you up to something, Rella?” Aquila stepped close, her skepticism growing deeper. “First, unlike others, you dared to question why the duke forbid his servants, then said to me that the king has a bigger heart than my father, and now you’re here in a dress that you can’t possibly afford, saying that you *have* to be here. What are you up to? You have acted strange from the moment I met you, always alert and distant. Everyone said so. And I can’t help but doubt you.”

Austrella stared at her in shock, her lips parted. She didn’t know Aquila had noticed. She should’ve been more careful with her attitude and words. “I’m not up to anything, Aquila—I mean, *lady* Aquila.”

Aquila’s doubt remained unshaken. She folded her arms across her chest, her expression sharp. “We had a terrible experience with two of our servants before, and from then on, my father made strict rules for them. And you, you look a little familiar and act strangely unlike others, which is why I can’t ignore the questions that your presence raises. Those old servants gave the duke a worse experience, speaking about him like you did and breaking the rules often. Only later did we realize they had dark intentions. So, I’m going to report you to the duke. He needs to know.”

She turned on her heels.

Austrella groaned inwardly, slapping a hand on her now sweaty forehead. “Wait.” She reached out and caught Aquila’s hand, her grip firm but pleading. Her cousin turned. “You can’t tell him. You just can’t,” she pleaded quietly.

How was she supposed to make her understand without providing her the truth?

“See, Rella? Now you have confirmed you are indeed up to something—”

“I’m not up to anything, Aquila!” Austrella could hardly keep her voice down. Casting a glance around them, she turned to her cousin and took a step closer. “I just need your help—I mean, I want you to do me a favor by... by covering up for me that you let me borrow your dress—or anyone’s dress—that you gave me permission to come.”

Aquila furrowed her eyebrows deeply before narrowing her eyes. “So that explains it. You *are* up to something. Why would I cover for you anyway?” She scoffed.

Her cousin was indeed going to regret this attitude, Austrella knew. “Because I know something that you are desperate to know.”

“And what is that?”

Austrella glanced around them once again before leaning closer. “I know where your cousin Austrella is.”

Aquila’s eyes grew wide, shock betraying her face. Her jaw dropped. “No way. No way—no, of course not, you are simply trying to convince me to work out whatever your plan—”

“I’m not up to anything! I’m not trying to convince you, I’m trying to tell you that she is *not* dead.” She hoped her parents would forgive her for this, but telling Aquila the truth was the only way.

Aquila’s eyes bulged with shock. She grew pale and dragged Austrella to a corner, keeping a good distance between them and the people around. “Y-you can’t be serious—how can I believe you? No, no, you are just trying to convince me, are you—”

“I’m not—”

“Austrella *is* dead,” Aquila said, her words sharp at first and then shaken by sadness.

Austrella shook her head. *I'm here, I'm right here.* Swallowing the hardness from her throat at Aquila's words, she asked, "What is the proof? Did anyone see her getting killed? Anyone found her body?"

"N-no, but..."

Austrella fought back the whirlwind of her emotions. "She escaped. She is alive and she is desperate to reunite with you. I know where she is."

Aquila's lips parted. Her eyes began to glisten with unshed tears. "I can't... I can't believe this. Is she... is she truly alive? Can I believe this?"

"Yes."

"But how? How did she escape? How do I know you are telling me the truth?"

"If you would cover up for me and promise me not to breathe a word to anyone about Austrella for her safety, I promise to tell you everything. I will tell you where she is."

Aquila's face was now drenched in desperation. "Is this really true? If it is, then where is she? I want to see her, a-and I will keep her safe." Her voice cracked as she spoke. "I have always... always wished if she had..."

Tears dampened Austrella's eyes, but she fought them; she mustn't reveal herself now. She would tell Aquila when they were somewhere safer. "She's... she's getting herself into a little danger, but she would be safe if you promise not to tell anyone. She trusts you, Aquila, don't break it."

Her cousin nodded tearfully. "I can't believe this... at all, but I promise." She looked away to wipe her tears away.

Austrella almost lost herself witnessing Aquila's desperation. "Alright then. I promise to tell you everything after the ball."

Eyes averted, Aquila nodded once more.

Austrella needed to get away from her cousin, or she might blurt out the truth then and there. She heaved a deep breath and turned to walk away, but Aquila caught her wrist. She stiffened and turned, meeting Aquila's eyes that were smoldered slightly.

"If you're lying, Rella, if you are using to me work out whatever you intend to do, I swear, I will *not* hesitate to tell my father and report you."

"I'm not lying, Aquila. You will see."

Austrella had never thought she would reveal herself to anyone, but tonight had changed that. She had to do it in order to stay here for the allowed time. Aquila would surely understand how important it would be to keep her secret safe once she learned the truth. She wouldn't tell anyone, and Austrella and her parents would remain safe. Right?

She could only hope that she hadn't made a wrong choice.

Though, revealing herself to her cousin would make her life better, and she would surely be appointed as her handmaid. Or, who knows, maybe she might be plucked out of the kitchen entirely.

Austrella hoped everything would be alright.

CHAPTER 4 | STRANGER

Austrella halted at the ballroom's magnificent entrance on the elevated platform, and the view stretched before her had awe hold her captive.

Now, *this* looked different than she remembered.

The ballroom was grand, stretching wide with chandeliers hanging like huge sparkling stars from the ceiling, the glow of the lights danced upon the polished floors that shone like gold. The air was alive and filled with music. The room itself seemed magical.

She moved to the edge of the elevated platform with intricately designed rails. Smiling in awe, she leaned against the rails and watched the unfolding display below.

Couples spun and twirled on the dance floor. Chatter and laughter filled the air, coming from the people who had gathered at the tables in the corners of the room. Her gaze swept the floor, searching to see if anyone was familiar, but from such height, she couldn't recognize any face.

Austrella smiled wider, her heart lifted by the beauty of it all. Several memories flooded into her mind; the balls they used to host, a time when there was peace, one filled with joy—true joy.

That joy was now stolen, but she would make sure nothing would ruin this night for her. Whether this was her last chance here or not, she would treasure it as long as it lasted, even though the memories pained her heart.

Austrella lifted her eyes, searching the upper balcony across the room that the royals used to observe the festivities from an elevated point. She wanted to see the infamous dark prince she had never seen before—though she knew his presence would destroy her moment with surging anger; the mere thought of him did, after all.

Marilee had told her that the prince never participated in the ball, so she expected him to be in the balcony. But it was empty. Maybe she could join the people and enjoy the ball after all, since it was rather a ball for the citizens now.

Austrella moved to the grand staircase that led to the ballroom floor, deciding to forget the prince for tonight. Two ladies walked past her to the herald who stood near the staircase and gave their names. At his announcement, they glided down the stairs graciously.

Austrella recognized the herald; he was the same herald from the time she remembered, the one who had been quite fond of her and her brother—enough to fulfill their wishes to be announced into one such ball as *Lord Adam* and *Lady Ella of Catsimoor*. Their parents had been embarrassed then and scolded them.

The dance ended, people switched partners, and new people joined the dance floor by the time Austrella approached the announcer. She gave him her name as *Lady Ella of Catsimoor*.

Maybe she couldn't rewind things, but she could renew the memories.

Austrella saw the herald's eyebrows furrow for a moment—she prayed he remembered—before he cleared his throat. “Lady Ella of Catsimoor!”

The chatter died out slowly, as everyone's attention turned to her one by one. It wasn't her name that caught their attention, rather, it was her gown. Women's jaws dropped, and some shared whispers gesturing to her gown.

Taking a deep breath, Austrella curtsied and descended slowly. Apart from the banging of her rapid heartbeat, furious breathing, the clicking of her heels, and the whispers from the people, the room had fallen quiet as if beholding its princess.

Only if they knew that she *was*.

Each delicate step surfaced each memory; the first being her running down the stairs after being announced into the room instead of gliding gracefully like a princess. Austrella fought the amused quiver of her lips at the recollection and summoned the courage to meet the eyes of her people.

Even after she reached the bottom of the stairs, the room held its breath, the questioning, awed-filled gazes trying to pierce through her anonymity. Oh, the trance one beautiful gown can put an entire ballroom in!

A few young noblewomen stepped forward and spoke with her, acting friendly as they made introductions before complimenting her on her gown and

asking who the tailor was. Austrella would never forget the look on their faces when she told them that she was a servant of Duke Travis and that the gown was a borrowed one. She would remember this and laugh about it forever. Their interest in her had faded quickly.

Nevertheless, some who approached her afterward stayed talking even after learning she was a servant. In between, Austrella was aware of Aquila's watchful, suspicious gaze, and she often met it with a small smile.

Austrella spotted many familiar faces all across the room, which had her tensed even though they couldn't recognize her. She watched them laugh, chat, and dance. Letting her eyes wander through the room while partially listening to the chatting of a girl beside her, a very familiar face caught her attention from across the room.

Austrella's heart skipped a beat; it was her maternal grandmother, Celica.

The one who made this very gown she wore.

Her grandmother was laughing at something someone had said. Austrella couldn't look away. Suddenly, her grandmother's gaze locked with hers, eyebrows knitting together.

Austrella stiffened. *Uh-oh.* This was not a good sign. Would she recognize the gown and come to question her? Who would ever forget their masterpiece anyway? It was a blessing her grandmother hadn't come up to Austrella straight after when she had entered the ballroom.

Her grandmother said something to her companion before making her way across the room towards her with purposeful strides. Austrella hadn't expected *this* trouble.

"Please excuse me; I need to get some fresh air." Austrella excused herself from the girl talking with her immediately and strolled to the other end of the room where she knew was a door. Swift as the wind, she slipped away from the crowd, reached the door and pushed it open.

Austrella distanced herself from the ballroom. The garden was her destination. As much as she wished to wander through the castle, she feared she might cross paths with the last person she wished to see—the dark prince.

Austrella didn't look back; she ran until she reached the doorway to the garden. Relief swirled within her as she stepped into the cool night air that

allowed her to catch her breath and gather her thoughts, far from the prying eyes of the ballroom.

That was close.

She didn't know if she could return to the ballroom again. Or if her grandmother was coming after her.

She froze at that thought before gathering her skirts and stepping into the garden, hoping for solace. The garden sprawled like a wonderland, illuminated by a few lanterns. The air was sweet with the scent of flowers, their vibrant colors softened by the light.

She glanced around breathlessly. She didn't know her favorite garden had been this beautiful. A bittersweet ache tugged at her heart as she remembered the mornings when she used to take a stroll with her brother, a time that seemed both distant and just yesterday.

Austrella walked into the garden, pushing away the memories that threatened to engulf her. The soft murmur of voices drifted to her ears, coming from somewhere near within the garden, an annoying reminder that she wasn't alone. But she wanted to be alone.

Her steps halted at a memory that stirred within her mind.

The maze.

The maze, of course! No one would go in there because it was difficult to return and easy to get lost.

She ran further into the garden, far away from where the voices came from. Soon enough she found herself on a winding path that led her to the entrance of the maze. There was no light inside the maze other than the moonlight. The hedge rose high above her, making her feel both comforted and haunted.

Despite the fact that ten years had passed, Austrella still remembered the way to the heart of the maze and the trick Adam had shown her to navigate her way back. Brushing her fingers against the leaves, she ventured into the maze. Memories resurfaced with each step. She remembered the days when she and her brother would run through this very maze and hide, the memory of their laughter still echoed in the air.

After a few twists and turns, she reached the heart of the maze, a clearing with a fountain in the center. A faint smile tugged at her lips before she neared

the fountain. The full moon's light reflected in the water, making it appear crystal-like.

Something about the air here held so much peace. It made her wish to stay there forever. Austrella closed her eyes, inhaling deeply as tears began rushing in. This place held so many memories.

"What are you doing here?"

Austrella's heart gave an unexpected leap, eyes snapping open. She jumped, turning around at once at the rich male voice. Her white gown whirled along with her movement. Her eyes met with a pair of blue that seemed to gleam in the moonlight.

Her heart skipped a beat.

There, just a few feet away, stood a young man slightly older than her. The moonlight gleamed on his face as he stepped out of the shadows; it painted his features with an ethereal glow. He was clearly unfamiliar, and he was not at the ball. If he were, it would've been impossible not to notice him.

His expression was stern and his gaze held her captive. Austrella couldn't move, or speak.

"What are you doing here?" His voice was deep and rich, but stern, bringing darkness into his aura; a combination of mystery and allure.

Austrella's heart beat strangely fast but she composed herself. "I-I was just—just looking around."

He paced forward, a shadow falling over his eyes when he furrowed his eyebrows. He had dark hair and his features were well-defined, with a chiseled jawline, and cheekbones that hinted at strength. An undeniable handsomeness emanated from him, a certain allure that was hard to ignore.

"Looking around?" he asked, empathizing each word in an unwelcoming tone. His eyes narrowed as if in suspicion. "This is no place for you to be. You must leave *now*."

Austrella sealed her lips. She had not realized she was staring at him with lips parted as if he was a mysterious part of the castle she'd never seen—until his rude words reached her ears.

She straightened her spine. "Why?"

"You are not supposed to be here. Nobody's allowed here," he stated firmly, his words like a sword of authority. He halted a few steps away from her.

The inner princess stirred within her—a rare thing it was—and she held her head high with a look of challenge. Who was *he* to prohibit *her* from being in a maze that rightfully belonged to her? She scoffed mentally.

“Why not? It’s not like there’s a rulebook at the entrance, is there? I saw nothing.”

His eyes now held an intensity; one like the fire’s. “No, but the guards were supposed to stop you.”

The princess in her wasn’t about to be silenced soon. “Actually, I saw no one. Even if they were there, they might have not noticed me just like I didn’t notice them, *or* must’ve kindly let me in.”

His eyebrows furrowed even more deeply, the eyelashes shadowing his blue eyes. “How did you get here?”

“On my feet.”

“It is not easy to find your way here. Everyone new has only gotten lost.”

Austrella didn’t let it falter her. She composed herself and answered slightly prideful, “I am a maze expert. I always know how to find my way in and out.”

“Regardless,” his tone was uncompromising, “you need to leave. As I said, no one is allowed.”

Austrella stared in disbelief. “Oh, I’m sorry, but *what*? I assume this rule is made by the dark prince and are you seriously telling me to leave when *you*, yourself, have broken the rule and come here?”

The charming stranger blinked. His eyebrows knitted together, his expression flickering between surprise and something else. He attempted to speak, his lips parted, but no words came out. Slowly, a small smile curved his lips.

“Clever,” he muttered before conceding with a slow nod. “You’re right. I should not have spoken to you like that when I have broken the prince’s rule.” His face lit with a smile as if his sternness was never there.

Now, it was her turn to blink at the shift in his attitude. Soon enough, her lips twitched into a smug smile at the victory. “Better think twice before you say anything, especially so rude.”

He stepped forward. “Forgive me for my words, my lady, I will not dare to repeat it.” His voice took on a new timbre, another shift that made her heart skip a beat. “May I know the name of the one who has brought me to my senses?”

Austrella blushed but rolled her eyes to cover it and met his gleaming blue eyes that stole her breath away. “M-my name is Ella.”

“Ella,” he repeated as if testing her name. “Well then, Lady Ella, where are you from?”

She didn’t want to tell him that she was a servant, to avoid making a poor impression, and dodged his question. “Do-do you think the prince will be anywhere here though?” she asked, glancing around them. “He was not at the ball. And since no one is allowed here, this must be his private place, perhaps?”

When she returned her gaze to him, he averted his eyes. Clearing his throat, he looked back at her again. “You have a fair point there. The prince wouldn’t be pleased if he finds out we broke the rule, so may I have the honor to escort you back to the ball?”

Austrella blushed again. Her body flamed with a strange heat. She couldn’t ignore the magnetism that emanated from him. “If you must, but I should admit, I would be happy to displease the prince.”

His brow quirked with a tingle of amusement, and he offered her his arm. Austrella accepted it rather nervously; there was something about his presence that radiated something that sent warmth to her. Now, the proximity nearly consumed her.

“I take it that you don’t like him,” he muttered as they walked back.

“Who likes him anyway?”

“So what brought you to the ball?”

Austrella glanced aside at the charming stranger. “Oh, did you think I’m here because the prince is looking for a bride? Oh no, then you are completely mistaken. Don’t you know that the prince *won’t* choose and this ball is rather for the citizens?”

He met her gaze. “I’m aware that is what the people believe, but it doesn’t change the fact that the ball is hosted for the prince. What if he chooses this time?”

“I don’t think he will.” Austrella shrugged. “I mean, it has been three years and he has not found anyone, so it explains it.”

“He isn’t looking for just anyone,” he replied, the words carrying a layer of mystery. “He is looking for *the one*.”

The confidence in his voice intrigued her and she quirked an eyebrow at him. “You sound like you know what he is doing. Do you know him?”

He smiled lightly. “What made you think so?”

“Nothing.” She looked away. Holding gaze with him felt like a challenge she couldn’t take. “I mean, everyone believes he won’t choose and you just seem to think differently. But I highly doubt he would even have someone as *the one*.”

“You clearly don’t like him.”

“Because he is stupid.”

The charming stranger chuckled, and his laughter was enchanting, making her eyes snap to him as if she had never heard someone laugh before. “And what makes you think he is stupid?”

Austrella didn’t know why he had found that funny to laugh at, but a smile tugged at the corner of her own lips. She was supposed to grimace at every mention of the dark prince, but the charming stranger didn’t even let her frown.

“Stupid to think that he will find someone from the citizens who hate—*wait*.” She halted swiftly, stopping him as well. “You didn’t tell me your name.”

“Don’t you think it’s fun if we talk without knowing each other’s names?” He arched a perfect eyebrow.

She fought back a laugh. “But you know my name already.”

His eyebrows rose in realization. “Oh, right. But I do think it’s more interesting if I don’t tell you my name now.” Mirth danced in his eyes.

Austrella nodded subconsciously as she stared into his ocean eyes. She looked away soon, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “So... where are you from?”

“I would say... I live somewhere near here.”

Austrella narrowed her eyes at him. “So you are not going to reveal your name and where you are from?”

“I told you, it’s interesting that way. I will tell you my name and everything once the ball is over.”

“That’s very unfair of a gentleman,” she retorted as they continued walking. “I take it that you are mysterious. You seem so. But mystery comes with secrets, the kind of secrets that are dark. So I’ll take it you are dark like this labyrinth,” she quipped.

“Actually, I would like to leave you waiting with curiosity to learn my name so you would *never* forget me.”

“I won’t forget you. Thanks to your first attitude.”

The charming stranger chuckled like a pleasant melody. “So, tell me,” he began. “What if the dark prince chooses you?”

Austrella was taken aback. No such thought had crossed her mind. Ever. It was not something to worry over, but rather hilarious.

“Mr. *I Will Reveal My Name After The Ball*,” she said, smirking as she saw him taken aback at her choice of call, “it is highly impossible for the prince to choose a bride when he doesn’t even show up for the occasion. So no one needs to worry about it.”

His eyes lingered on her even after she looked away. “But what if he chooses you?”

“He won’t. If he does, it will be the greatest mistake he’ll ever make,” Austrella countered. “It will be the most challenging and dangerous risk he should be wise *not* to take.” She turned her gaze on him, only to find that his eyes were still on her. She looked away blushing, and glanced around. “Wait, I think we are going the wrong way—”

“Rest assured, this is the easy and the short way out.”

Suspicion sparkled in her and she eyed him with her eyebrows raised. “And how on earth do *you* know a short way? Do you often come here?”

His lips twitched up, eyes twinkling. “Like you, I’m also a maze expert.”

Austrella furrowed her eyebrows. How did he know a shortcut her brother didn’t? Because if Adam knew it, he would’ve told her.

Soon enough, they got out of the maze and stepped into the garden. Silence followed them all the way out, and Austrella couldn’t help but feel more heated. When they neared the palace, where the chatter of the people rose from, he drew them to a halt.

“I’m afraid I have to leave for a moment. I have to be somewhere else now urgently, but I promise to meet you again soon.”

Austrella felt a tug of disappointment. As much as she tensed around him, she wanted to *know* him. She nodded with a forced smile. “You’re not going to run away, are you? Leaving me with no name but just the memory of a rude man in the maze?”

He laughed lightly. "Forgive me for my poor first impression. But don't worry, I would never run away. I promise you, you will know my name soon."

Austrella felt a blush creeping up her cheeks, his words kindling a heat within her. "Alright. I hope your name should be something worth waiting for."

He smiled and his next words only fanned her flames. "Promise me a dance?"

Austrella was suddenly breathless. "Y-yes."

"Perhaps two dances? Or three? One will never satisfy me."

Austrella swore that it would be the end of her if she danced with him. His proximity left her unable to breathe properly. He stirred wild sensations within her.

She managed to force a smile. "As much as you want. But... but only after I know your name."

His smile deepened. "Then I will return quickly. It was truly delightful to meet you, Lady Ella." He took her hand and pressed a lingering kiss to her knuckles.

Austrella's world shifted, and all at once, she was swept up in emotions she had never quite felt before.

She held her breath. His lips, soft and warm, met her hand with a tenderness that ignited a fire within her. It was simply a kiss on her hand, a gesture every gentleman did, but this felt different... *deeper*.

As he straightened, his eyes met hers. She saw a gleam, a brilliance that transcended mere beauty in them. Only when he dropped her hand did she breathe.

To hide the tension reflected on her face, she forced another smile. "I... I could've said the same if... if I knew your name."

"A rude man I am, aren't I?" he quipped. "But I promise your wait will be over soon. I should be going. I will see you," he said, his voice a velvet promise. "Oh, and, consider this as an apology from me for my rudeness." The hand he held behind him came forth, holding a red rose.

Austrella blushed furiously, wondering where it had come from; she didn't recall seeing him plucking one on their way. "Fine, but I swear to throw it away if you leave without revealing your name." She feigned seriousness as she accepted the rose.

His smile was wide. "If I leave without fulfilling my promise to a gracious lady, I swear I will *not* sleep for the rest of my life." He winked.

She laughed. "Better not."

With a final smile, he turned and walked away, leaving her staring after him.

Even after he disappeared from her sight, Austrella remained spellbound, her gaze locked on the place where he had been. Hand on her chest, she tried to catch her breath. She didn't know what was happening to her, but she was certain about one thing; the first thing she'd do after getting back would be to write to her parents about this enchanting stranger.

"And who is that?" Aquila's voice came from behind.

Austrella didn't turn, her mind still entangled in thoughts of the charming stranger. "Just someone mysterious." She smiled softly. "He seems to believe that revealing his name after the ball is interesting."

"I thought you might've run away."

Aquila's response pulled Austrella back to the present, snapping her out of the mystery the stranger had held her in. She spun around to see Aquila, and much to her surprise, Alondra approached them too.

"Oh." Her cheeks flushed slightly at being caught in her reverie. "Wait, what did you say?" She held the rose behind her.

"Seeing you nowhere, I thought you might've run away," Aquila admitted her thoughts carelessly, the gaze she held on Austrella still having a tingle of suspicion.

Austrella blinked. "No, why would I? But what are you both doing out here?"

"Fresh air," Alondra said with a shrug, joining her sister. "Oh, and, not to mention, to get a break from the relentless chatter of those girls who have nothing better to discuss than the prince!" Annoyance laced in her voice.

Austrella stifled a laugh. "Which girls?"

"The ones who swarmed you as soon as you entered," Aquila answered, sounding equally annoyed as Alondra.

"Oh, them." Austrella remembered the noblewomen who had admired her gown with uttermost interest and envy. "Yes, they were quite annoying."

Alondra nodded. "Annoying is only an understatement." She sounded both amused and exasperated. "They won't stop giggling and talking about the prince. Ever since I met them, I've been trying *not* to giggle—to avoid sounding like

them! They were admiring their dresses so loudly, hoping the prince would like them. But you know what; they look like fishes in those extravagant gowns!"

Austrella laughed with her cousins. Slowly, realization dawned upon her; she was *actually* laughing with her cousins as if they were friends. She didn't expect Alondra, her fifteen-year-old cousin, to ever be talkative.

"And you know what's even worse?" Aquila started, the suspicion in her eyes now shifting into a friendly warmth. "They're so jealous of your gown that they even mentioned the idea of throwing something to soil it. They were even more jealous when everyone was talking about it."

Austrella burst into laughter. "So, they're beyond annoying," she agreed, half-immersed in disbelief for getting to laugh with her cousins.

"Exactly!" Alondra exclaimed. "The most infuriating thing was—*ugh!*—they keep talking about the prince. Especially the *kissing* part."

Austrella's amusement fell. She blinked. "The... *what?*"

"Don't you know?" Alondra leaned in, her voice lowered. "It's said that, after the prince dances with the girl he chooses, he will kiss her as a final declaration that he has chosen her as his bride."

"Ew, that's disgusting." Austrella made a face.

Her cousins laughed in agreement. "You know," Alondra spoke, eyeing Austrella's gown with a tilted head. "Your gown is unlike anything I have ever seen. Who made it? It's an absolute masterpiece."

When Austrella opened her mouth to say that it was borrowed, suddenly, two women hurried past them to the palace from outside. One of them turned around to them and exclaimed breathlessly, "Quick, hurry! We are all called back to the ballroom. I think something is about to happen—something unpredictable! Maybe... maybe the prince might be finally making his choice tonight!"

Austrella's eyes widened and she glanced at her cousins to find their reaction the same. They looked at each other in shock. Austrella couldn't believe it. She had come here with the confidence of him not choosing anyone.

"The prince... is going to choose? B-but I thought..."

"I thought he wouldn't choose!" Aquila said.

"Well, it is not confirmed yet, so come on," Alondra chimed in, her tone filled with curiosity. "We should go back and see what's happening. As much as I think

the prince deserves worse *than* hell, I hope one of those mean girls won't be chosen. I won't stand them taking a position higher than me."

Austrella chuckled while Aquila rolled her eyes.

Austrella hurried after her cousins into the palace. Everyone present outside was rushing back to the castle. Her cousins ran up the stairs ahead of her. Austrella's pace fell as several people rushed past her. She hurried behind them.

When she reached the ballroom, it seemed to be filled with more people than when she left it. Many people remained on the elevated platform while she climbed the stairs down to the floor, looking for her cousins, hoping to stay with them after the light-hearted conversation they had had. However, seeing them standing with their parents, she decided to stand on the stairs, a few steps from the bottom, holding the rose firmly.

The room was filled with the chatter of people guessing what the news must be.

A sudden fanfare of trumpets pierced the air. Austrella's gaze darted to the elevated balcony across the room—a place only for the royal family.

A man in a uniform stood up there, and he stepped forward, his voice commanding and full of authority as he called out, "People of Catsimoor! Prepare yourselves to behold the crown prince! The time has finally arrived for His Highness to choose his bride! One among you is destined to be the prince's bride and the future queen of Catsimoor."

Austrella's gaze swept through the crowd. Furious whispers broke out from the once silent room. She clung to the railing for support, her pulse racing as she wondered who the *unlucky* one might be, to be *the one* of the prince.

She remembered the charming stranger and scanned through the crowd for him, but didn't find him. She caught sight of women rearranging their hair and smoothing down their gowns in anxiety. She couldn't believe that they fancied the prince after all he had done.

When the trumpets sounded again, her eyes returned to the balcony. The crowd's excitement seemed to surge and the very air seemed to vibrate with anticipation.

Suddenly, the massive door on the elevated balcony swung open by the guards who flanked it, and the man's voice rang out, "His Highness, Prince Liven!"

Prince Liven entered the platform, each step taken with a princely grace. The crowd erupted in cheers. He drew close to the rails, and when his face became clear to her view, Austrella froze and the air was knocked out of her lungs.

His eyes swept over the sea of faces, his gaze found and locked onto hers. Time seemed to halt, the cheers and music faded into a distant murmur. Her eyes widened when his intense stare held her in a hypnotic grip.

The rose in her hand fell.

It was *him*.

The stranger she was enchanted to meet in the maze was Prince Liven.

Realization, shock, and disbelief hit her like a thunderbolt.

Holding the stare, Prince Liven smiled. Her heart stopped.

The charming stranger was no one but the dark prince himself.

CHAPTER 5 | ENCHANTMENT

It felt as if the ground disappeared beneath her. Austrella stood, mouth agape as the reality sank in. Thoughts swirled in her head like leaves in the wind, and one of them terrified her.

She promised him a dance.

Austrella felt betrayed and deceived. He was pretending all the time, leaving her enchanted by him, while he was someone she purely hated. More reason to hate him now.

The air crackled with his magnetic aura and people kept cheering, eyes upon the unrightful heir to the throne. Prince Liven's eyes remained on her for a moment before he looked away to the people. She looked away as well, touching her fingers to her chest and trying to catch the breath the shock had stolen.

The man beside the prince shot a hand in the air. As the ballroom slowly crept into silence, Prince Liven began speaking.

"Firstly, I want to thank everyone for coming here tonight for the ball." His voice resonated through the hall, filled with power. "Your presence here has filled me with uttermost joy, and I humbly thank you for joining us the past three years. I cannot thank you enough for your support for me while I looked for my bride. I know many of you believed I would not choose, and I would love to remind you that I was not looking for just *anyone* to marry. I was waiting for *the one*."

He isn't looking for just anyone, he is looking for the one.

Austrella snorted angrily as she recalled his words, and glared up at him while the crowd released happy sighs.

The prince's eyes swept through the crowd as he continued, "I am greatly delighted to tell you that the day we all have been waiting for has finally arrived. But I'm also disappointed to tell you that this will be the last of the balls, but not

to worry, there will be more balls coming up this year after my engagement, and all of you are welcome.”

People cheered and smiles blossomed on their faces. Austrella was certain that she was the only one who didn’t.

“However, the time has finally come for me to choose a bride who will rule by my side as the future queen. There is one among you who walked into my sight, declaring herself my bride, and caught me in a free fall, quicker than I thought. I felt like hit by lightning when I saw her, and now I could no longer wait to dance with her.” His running gaze finally landed on Austrella on the stairs, making her heart race in a newfound fear.

He continued, “I would not make you wait any longer. To become my wife, my princess, and my future queen, I choose...”

The room fell into pin-drop silence; everyone seemed to hold their breath.

No, no, no.

Austrella held her breath as well, wishing on the heavens that her newfound fears were not true.

“I choose Lady Ella of Catsimoor.”

Her heart skipped a thousand beats and a horrid gasp escaped her lips, eyes widening like saucers. A surreal sense of unreality gripped her soul.

It felt like a cruel joke. It *had* to be.

The sound of her heartbeat pounding in her ears was louder than the trumpet she’d heard earlier. His words sank in her like an anchor pulling her down.

Gasps broke from the crowd, every eye turned to her in shock, some in disbelief and some in awe. It felt like a million eyes stared at her.

Austrella shook her head. “No.” However, only a whisper broke out. She tried to back away, but her body went numb, trapping her in shock.

The room swayed around her, the whispers a distant melody, and the faces a blur as she stared at *him*. Amidst the shocked murmurs, Prince Liven, with his eyes fixed on her, descended the stairs with a regal grace. The crowd parted like the Red Sea, parting for their future king to make a way.

And his eyes were for her alone.

Her shock deepened when he made his way towards her; the realization that this was real hit her so hard that she couldn’t breathe.

She tightened her grip on the railing. He was coming to her, for the dance, to announce her as his bride. *This cannot be happening!* She wanted to scream in frustration and anger, but she could barely move.

Prince Liven approached her, a delicate twinkle in his eyes and a gentle smile curving his lips slightly. He halted below the grand staircase where she stood unmoved; staring at him as if he had come to chain her.

"Lady Ella, may I have this dance please?" The prince offered his hand in a gesture that should have been the stuff of fairy tales, but it felt more like a twisted dream.

Austrella shook her head frantically. "N-no." Her voice was barely above a whisper that only the prince could hear. "No."

He arched an eyebrow, hand still extended to her, and his gaze unwavering. "You promised me a dance, remember?" His voice was quiet too, but steady unlike her wavering one. "Not just one, but as much as I wanted."

Austrella shook her head again. Her heart pounded like a trapped bird within her chest. Every pair of eyes in the room watched them curiously. "No. No, no, I won't," she muttered tensely.

Prince Liven dropped his hand and ascended the steps to her, halting on the one below hers. "A promise is a powerful thing, and you can't simply break it," he said without a hint of relenting.

"No—"

"I choose you, Ella," he said with the same gleam in his eyes that had been alluring her in the maze. "Now I want that promised dance."

"I reject you," she blurted with another shake of her head. "I... I don't—I don't want this."

"But *I* have chosen you. No change can be made," he asserted with a ring of authority that sent a chill down her spine.

Fear lodged in her throat. He was the dark prince, the one who had invaded her kingdom and murdered her brother, and now, he had chosen her as his bride. How was she going to escape while keeping the truth in the shadows?

"N-no, please, don't do this to me." Fear filled her eyes.

"And don't do this to *me*." He reached for her hand that clutched on the rails and uncurled her fingers before taking it in his. "Dance with me. Everyone is watching us."

The word *everyone* caught her attention, making her remember that a sea of eyes was observing them, and it made her powerless and helpless. She felt numb with fear that she couldn't pull her hand from his, that she couldn't think straight or stay resolute and make him give up or even run away.

"I don't want this," Austrella tried to hiss but it came out as a whisper instead. She was trapped in a labyrinth of her own emotions, and his gaze only drew her in deeper. "I... I can't. Please, I—"

"I know you don't like me, but consider me as just the stranger from the maze."

Austrella wanted to scoff or scream. He had no idea *how* much she wished that the stranger in the maze was somebody else already. A thousand words were on the tip of her tongue, but her voice was trapped. People were watching, and she didn't want to make a scene.

"Please," the prince added, his eyes pleading even as they held an unwavering determination before he tugged at her hand and stepped down.

She couldn't do anything. Like a magnetic power, she was forced to step down after him in defeat. Tears wet her eyes as helplessness washed over her. Everyone was waiting. There was no escape.

People moved from the dance floor when the prince led her to the center of the room. Austrella's knees trembled, and on her way, her gaze caught Aquila's suspecting one. It seemed like she had given Aquila another reason to suspect her.

The music started. Her heart thundered in fear when Prince Liven turned to her, leaving her in disbelief that *he* was the man in the maze. His hand closed around hers, intertwining their fingers.

His touch sent tremors through her, her trepidation increasing. He placed his other hand on her waist, igniting a trail of electric heat that snaked its way through her veins. Helpless, she placed her trembling hand on his shoulder.

She would not be his bride, she would convince him later, but she would dance with him now.

Fighting back her tears, she willed herself not to look at him. But her eyes disobeyed her as his gaze held a magnetism that brought her eyes up. Their eyes locked, and her breath hitched.

Filled with secrets, his ocean eyes, a shade of blue that mirrored the depth of the seas, were now intense as he stared down at her, an intensity that could draw one in like a siren's call.

As the music began to swell around them, their bodies moved in rhythm. He drew her closer, their bodies only inches away, and a shiver traced her spine. His proximity was intoxicating like she remembered, but more terrifying now.

Austrella knew this dance. Her mother had taught her but she never thought her first real dance in ten years would be with the dark prince. She tried to focus on the steps, on the dance itself, but her thoughts were a chaotic whirlwind. His presence was a magnetic force that she couldn't resist. But he was the dark prince. She needed to resist.

When she stared back at him, the surroundings blurred around her, thoughts fading and anger disappearing. It was a new feeling, as if she stepped into a new world, as her fear was fading away. She felt enthralled, forgetting everything else.

Suddenly, in the middle of their dance, a sudden halt from Prince Liven pulled Austrella from the enthrallment. The prince swiftly turned around and waved a man over. In that pause, with confusion tugging her mind, Austrella tried to catch her breath.

Austrella scanned the faces around her. Some wore expressions of admiration, hands pressed against their hearts, while others gaped in awe. Jealous glares from a few met her gaze, being the first to look away.

The man Prince Liven signaled rushed to his side. The prince whispered something in his ear and the man nodded before rushing away. He then turned to her, an unreadable look on his face. "Come on, follow me." Holding her hand tight, he led her from the dance floor and towards the grand stairs across the room.

The ballroom whispered and murmured, watching their every move. Austrella clung to her skirt as she ascended the stairs with him, feeling a slight relief to get away from all the people, so she could speak to him. Hand in hand with the dark prince, she followed his lead, towards the elevated balcony that he had earlier descended from.

They exited the ballroom, stepping into the hallway. The doors closed behind them. "So you're the prince," Austrella breathed as soon as they were out.

She attempted to free her hand from his grasp but his hold remained steadfast. “Why did you not tell me?”

He turned to glance at her with a smile that she wanted to wipe off his face so badly. “You wouldn’t have talked to me if you had known, would you?”

“You lied to me.” She gritted her teeth.

“No, I was actually surprised when I realized you thought I *wasn’t* the prince. But I did not lie to you,” Prince Liven spoke matter-of-factly, as they continued walking down the hallway. “I told you I was living somewhere near and that is true, is it not? I am living in the castle, *near* the maze, and don’t forget that I am an actual maze expert.”

Austrella grunted. “Where are you taking me to?” She looked around the familiar hallway before looking back at him.

Prince Liven flashed a smile with a mischievous glint dancing in his eyes. “Why, we are going to have a private dance, *my love*.”

Her eyes widened in shock, she came to a halt suddenly, making him pause as well. “*My love*? Don’t you dare call me that!” she retorted, pulling her hand from his grasp forcefully, and this time, he let her go.

The prince smirked. “Ella.” His tongue caressed her name. “Whether you like it or not, you are going to be my princess, and I will call you whatever I like.”

Austrella summoned her strength to glare. “I will never marry you,” she hissed. Her determination surged forth, pushing her to speak more. “You’re the dark prince and I will never marry you, okay? I do not want any of this, so please let me go, and choose someone else.”

Amusement faded from his face. “I’ve made my decision. As I told you, there will be no change to it. Now, come on.” He grabbed her hand and continued walking.

Austrella followed unwillingly, but that didn’t stop her from talking. “I won’t marry you! I don’t like you; you are evil, you invaded this kingdom, murdered—”

“Ella,” he uttered her name like a warning and turned to her swiftly, piercing his intense gaze into hers. The smiles were long gone now, and he looked deadly stern. Like a true dark prince. He took a step closer. “What I said is said. I will *not* change my mind. Whether you like it or not, I choose you. I am not letting you go. And that is final,” he said with finality, authority ringing.

Austrella's knees trembled at his stern words. He was the dark prince, he had powers, he was a murderer, and his sudden sternness reminded her that she must be careful. This must be who he really was, and the kindness he showed after his sternness in the maze must have been a façade.

Her pace slowed as she felt herself grow more helpless. He was determined to have her.

Prince Liven led her to a closed, double-door doorway. The guards opened it when they neared, and he guided her inside. The room was bathed in a warm, golden glow. She hardly remembered the room—better to say, hall. The walls were adorned with cascades of fairy lights, its soft radiance casting enchanting shadows. Sprays of delicate flowers adorned every corner, seemingly arranged for this moment.

Upon an elevated platform at one end of the room, musicians were arranged, their instruments poised for the music they were about to play. The surroundings sent her heart to thump faster, making her realize more deeply that the walls were closing in with no escape from this.

I am not letting you go...

His words echoed in her thoughts, not letting her think straight.

The prince led her to the center of the room. The doors closed, and a curtain fell over the elevated platform where the musicians were, blocking the view of them. It felt like only the two of them were present.

She knew arguing with him might put her life in danger, yet she couldn't hold back herself from protesting. "Please, I—"

Her words were lost when he turned to her and intertwined their fingers. After glancing at their joined hands, her fearful gaze met his. The sternness in him wore off like an enchantment, and his expression softened.

"You know." He cast a glance at their hands as he began, "You promised to say that meeting me was wonderful once you learned my name, and now that you have, I'm waiting."

Austrella ignored it. She couldn't bring herself to retort anymore, not wanting to get on his real, bad side. "You must know, I'm only a servant."

The prince placed his hand on her waist gently and leaned down to whisper, "It doesn't matter to me, trust me."

Thus, her last hope of convincing him snuffed out like a candle's flame.

As the music started, he drew her into the dance, his arm encircling her with a tenderness she didn't expect after the sternness he'd shown. She found the same tenderness shoving away every bit of sternness off him. Her movements were hesitant, each step laced with the unspoken tension between them.

She kept her eyes away from him at first, but the intensity of the moment was palpable, her defiance and anger giving way to an undeniable magnetism that pulsed between them. Her eyes drew up to his.

Her anger began to shake, and deep-rooted confusion formed. Finding it hard to maintain a glare, she finally posed the question that plagued her thoughts. "Why me?" Her eyes searched his for an answer. "There are countless others who would gladly be your bride."

"Because you stepped into my sight, declaring yourself as my bride," Prince Liven said, his voice carrying an undertone of gravity.

Austrella's eyes filled with fear. There was no escape at all.

"Ella, look." He held her gaze captive. "Forgive me for my attitude; I can be unpredictable sometimes but..." His eyes softened, the gravity in his voice subsiding and filled with the same warmth she'd heard before. "Do not fear, I will not hurt you. You are safe with me."

His words were like a whisper of promise. Her anger disappeared. The inviting warmth in his voice made her forget the fear his previous sternness had brought. She didn't want to believe his words, but her heart refused *not* to believe it. As they danced, Austrella found herself lost in his ocean eyes, spellbound.

She felt herself lean into his embrace, every protestation on the tip of her tongue swallowed. As if forgetting everything else other than them, Austrella surrendered to the enchantment of the dance and to the allure of the dark prince who held her in his arms.

Prince Liven's hand, warm and steady, nestled at the small of her back, guiding her with grace, their eyes locked.

As the music quickened, he led her into a graceful spin. Austrella's white gown twirled around her like a cloud. The prince drew her back close, closer than before, his arm wrapping around her waist. Her heart skipped a beat as their bodies brushed against each other; it sent a flurry of strange heating sensations cascading through her.

She was set on fire.

He pulled her even closer. And then again, with a flourish, Prince Liven spun her outwards, her skirt swirling around her like a whirlwind. As he drew her back, her face touched his and her heart couldn't beat more faster. His hot breath hit her skin.

For a moment, neither she nor he backed away. Tension hung thick in the air. Austrella didn't know what was happening to her, but he was summoning heated, unrecognizable feelings within her.

With each twirl and step, her thoughts became hazy, clouded by the intense emotions and the allure of the moment. Then the music began to slow, its final notes echoing through the room. As the last note of the music faded into the air, their dance was done with a lingering, intimate embrace.

Austrella remained enveloped in his arms, her heart still racing from the whirlwind of emotions that he'd stirred within her. She couldn't look away from his mesmerizing eyes.

Where were the hatred and the heated anger now?

Being close to him had chased them away; it was as though she had almost forgotten *who* he was. What was happening to her? She didn't want to step away.

From the moment the dance had begun, something had changed.

"I want you to answer to me without the weight of my title, like you spoke to me in the maze." Prince Liven's voice was quiet as the breeze would be. "Would you like to be my bride?"

The sensation of his hand on her back caressing the fabric of her dress was electrifying. She remained enthralled when she said, "But... but you killed the royal family..."

"I didn't." His expression remained warm. "Believe it or not, I didn't. And I would tell you everything if you... if you will be my bride."

The emotions that had woven their way into her heart during the dance made the past blur. It was magical that two people could easily fall in love with just one dance. Her parents had fallen in love and were engaged after just their first dance, and they had told her it was magical that some dances could change lives forever. Now this dance had to be like that. He, captivated by the inexplicable connection they shared, entranced her.

"Yes." She barely registered her answer, lost in the depths of his eyes.

But as the word left her lips, a jolt of realization surged through her and she stumbled back in disbelief. She came to her senses.

What had she done? What was happening to her?

Confusion and uncertainty clouded her eyes as she stared at him. "I-I didn't... I-I don't know... I..." Her voice betrayed her inner turmoil.

"Ella." Prince Liven stepped forth to her, his eyes unreadable.

"I..." Before she could utter another word, his fingers grazed her cheek, a tender touch that she couldn't decipher.

And then, with a suddenness, he kissed her.

The gentle touch of his lips against hers sent a shockwave through her, a new surge of feelings that left her even more spellbound.

Her body froze, her mind reeling in shock. He stole her breath. She had anticipated many things that night, but never this. Alondra had warned her about this moment. She was consumed as he set her heart on fire. It was her first kiss.

Prince Liven pulled away slowly, leaving her gasping for breath, her heart pounding in her chest. Eyes wide, she stared at him, and her mind struggling to catch up with what had just transpired.

"I choose you, Ella."

Austrella's thoughts were tangled in confusion. It had to be the magic of the dance that she couldn't think straight, she was caught up in the sensations he wrapped her in.

The prince smiled softly. "Come, there's one more thing to be done." He led Austrella out of the adorned room, holding her hand.

"Where are we going?" Her lips tingled from the kiss that she couldn't stop thinking about.

"We're going to declare the engagement to the people." Before long, they arrived back at the door they had exited from the ballroom. He turned to her. "You should wait here until I call you, okay?"

She nodded. He dropped her hand after placing a kiss on her knuckles.

The doors opened and he stepped onto the elevated balcony. The crowd's attention shifted towards him, hushes spreading across the room.

We're going to declare the engagement to the people...

Austrella gasped in realization.

Only after she was out of his proximity was she able to think straight. What had she done?

Her mother had once told her that dances that could make one enthralled and forget everything, and fall in love with their partner... Was that what was happening to her? Dancing with Liven felt so magical that she had wanted to be his bride.

She touched her lips; they remained tingling from the kiss. For goodness' sake, she even let him *steal* her first kiss.

How could she easily forget what he'd done and say yes to him?

Oh Creator, what's happening to me?

In terror, Austrella realized the gravest mistake she had made. She never thought she would, but the dance was not a mere dance, it had her say yes to him.

It felt like an enchantment undone when Prince Liven stepped away from her.

Her eyes grew wider and she froze in realization.

He had used enchanting powers upon her.

She should've known how wicked he was!

The prince was making a speech on the other side of the door, his voice delightful, and the crowd responded with claps to whatever he happened to say. Her heart thundered in fear. She had to escape before the chance was ruined. As the moment of calling her in approached, her growing fear surged forth.

With a sudden decision, she turned on her heel, her dress swirling around her, and ran away.

Her slippers clicked against the floor as she sprinted as fast as possible. Her mind was consumed by a single thought: escape.

With the confidence of remembering the ways, taking a few turns, she emerged into the empty grand entrance hall. She ran outside not wasting a moment to pause, and the cool night air hit her face.

The clock struck twelve, and the bell began to ring.

Austrella ran down the stairs hurriedly, but as she almost neared the end, she tripped and one of her glass slippers slipped off her foot. Losing her balance, she fell over the steps and rolled down to the ground. Her body ached but she pushed the pain aside and jumped to her feet.

In haste, she turned to see her precious glass slipper lying a few steps above. She propelled forward to grab it, but the voices of the guards reached her ears. Two guards hurried to the entrance and as soon as they saw her, they ran down.

Panic gripped Austrella's heart, torn between the urgency of her escape and the importance of the slipper, but there was no time to retrieve it. The enchantment would last for at least a minute with one slipper on. If she could manage running single-slippered, she could get out before the transformation began.

With a reluctant determination, she turned away from the slipper, running across the courtyard where another guard held her horse.

Austrella sprinted towards her horse, and the guard unaware of her escape, stepped away. She grabbed the reins and swung herself onto the horse's back. With a swift kick, she urged the horse forward. The horse began its gallop out of the palace. She urged it again and the horse quickened the gallop.

Behind her, shouts erupted, the guards calling out to close the gates. Austrella leaned low over the horse's neck, urging it to run faster; a speed that had scared her once but now she didn't care. The pounding of hooves matched the rhythm of her racing heartbeats.

The courtyard became a blur. Soon, the horse rode past the gates. A glow emanated from her remaining slipper as they ran over the bridge, and the transformation began. The enchanted, white gown was replaced with her servant's dress.

Relief flooded through her veins as she rode past the bridge. She glanced back at the castle, and disbelief and shock filled in her eyes.

She had done it.

CHAPTER 6 | SURRENDER

Austrella reached the duke's manor faster than how she had arrived at the palace. Leaving the horse in the stables, she sprinted to the back door. Thankfully, there was no one there to see her. She ran for her room, her footsteps echoing through the corridor.

She was aware that this wasn't a complete escape. If the prince really wanted her, he would come for her. She didn't see exactly what good this runaway did, it had only saved her from being declared as his bride at that moment.

Her thoughts began driving her wild about her answer to Prince Liven.

She grunted angrily; he had truly used his powers to enchant her. There was no way she could be enchanted by him *naturally*.

Reaching her room, Austrella pushed open the door, only to halt when she saw Marilee awake and staring out through the window. At the door's creaking sound, Marilee's gaze turned and saw her. She gasped loudly.

"Rella!" She jumped to her feet from the chair she sat on and ran towards her. "Where on earth were you? I was worried sick about you!" She crashed into a hug.

Austrella hugged her back after a moment of surprise. The comfort of being in her room and with her friend wrapped around her like an embrace.

"Marilee," she breathed.

"Where on earth were you?" Marilee pulled away, worry etched on her face. "I looked everywhere—oh my gosh, what happened? Rella, you look sick! You are sweating! What happened? Where were you?"

"I..." Her chest fell and rose heavily as she panted. She closed the door behind her. "I went to the ball."

Marilee's eyes grew wide. "You... what?" she whispered in disbelief. "You... *how*? I-I mean, we can't—How did you go? Did you get a gown? You told me you

don't have one."

"My mother's..." Austrella struggled to breathe properly, yet she tried to speak. "My mother's gown—I had my... my mother's gown." She glanced around frantically, catching her breath, before walking over to her bed.

"Your mother?" Marilee's voice rang with confusion. "But I thought you said you don't know anything about your parents."

Austrella's eyebrows shot up in realization and stopped midway. She slapped her sweaty hand to her forehead. How many troubles was she planning to put herself in? Without answering, she walked to her bed and sat on it desperately.

"Tell me, how did you go to the ball? You could've at least told me. I was so worried about you! I couldn't inform anyone because people would think wrongly of someone if they disappeared at night, and I didn't want it to happen to you. But, tell me! The ball, how was it?" Marilee took a seat beside her.

Austrella strained to make her words out. "Oh Marilee... you wouldn't believe... I was... It was horrible... The prince... he..."

"The prince? What did he do? Oh, Rella, what's wrong?" Marilee grasped her hands, her eyes crammed with concern. "Okay, first, you need to calm down. Try taking deep breaths."

"Calm down?" Austrella asked frantically, her voice desperate. Tears began filling her eyes. "He chose me!" she revealed, eliciting a gasp from Marilee. "Marilee, he... he chose *me*!"

Marilee gasped again, her jaw dropping and her hands flying up to her mouth. "H-he chose... you? *You*? The prince—oh my God, Rella, this is... this is... brilliant! B-but I thought—I thought he would not choose! This is—"

"He's the dark prince, Marilee!" Austrella interjected, anger lacing in her voice.

The excitement on Marilee's face faded. "I know." Her voice lowered. "But, Rella, think! This is an opportunity someone like us would never get and you—Rella, you will be the princess—"

"I *am* the princess!" she blurted out, frustration loudening her voice. Realization hit her, and her eyes grew wide. *What have I done now?*

Marilee blinked before arching an eyebrow. "I don't understand."

Panic filled her throat, and before she knew it, words began to tumble out. "I mean... I mean, I always consider... see myself as a princess to... to avoid feeling

low about m-myself. And I... do feel like it.”

“But you will be a *real* princess!” Marilee’s voice dropped into an excited whisper. “But, tell me, tell me everything that happened. You danced with him, right? How was it?”

Austrella averted her gaze, swallowing hard. “I can’t believe I danced with him—the dark prince. I was... I was left with no choice because of the people watching, b-but then... we had a private one and it was...” She shut her eyes. “It felt magical, and I-I completely forgot about every horrible thing he did—I practically forgot *everything*! I felt enchanted by him, the dance was... magical, I was lost in him, and I... he asked me to his bride and I said yes—I said yes to the dark prince, Marilee! And then he... he... he kissed me.” Her voice dropped low.

Marilee gasped louder than the last time. “He kissed you?” Her excitement bubbled up. “And you... you agreed to marry him? Are you in love with him?”

Austrella squeezed her eyes close, despising Marilee’s last question. “When we danced, he made me feel everything, a-and those feelings he enchanted me with... made me feel like that.”

“So, you are in love with him!”

“No, I’m not!” Austrella’s eyes flung open, and she jumped to her feet, startling her friend. Her mixed emotions refused to let her calm down and she turned to look down at Marilee with tears of fury. “He enchanted me, Marilee, he put me under some enchantment—a spell, and made me say yes and let him *steal* my first kiss! And... and he made me forget everything and fall in love with him! His *spell* made me fall in love with him!”

“What?” Marilee’s excitement disappeared. “Did he... did he really do that?”

“Yes, he did, but the spell broke when he stepped away from me and I escaped as quickly as possible.”

“I can’t believe this.”

“He’s the dark prince, Marilee, what did you expect?”

“I know, but... So, since you’re no longer under the spell, you don’t feel anything for him anymore?”

The question caught Austrella by surprise and she felt dumbfounded. Her lips parted to speak but nothing came out. It rang in her head like a warning bell. Her heart raced as she sought for the answer.

The warmth hadn't left. The fire he set on her heart remained flaming. Her lips still burned from the kiss, and all the sensations he had given her lingered as she couldn't stop thinking of him.

But everything she felt in the dance towards him was because of the enchantment, right? She was certain he influenced her. It was impossible to fall for him by herself, and it *had* to be some enchantment.

"Rella, are you—" Marilee started, but paused as a knock sounded at the door. They exchanged questioning glances. "I'll get it," Marilee muttered before getting up.

She walked to the door and opened it, revealing a servant. The man's eyes met Austrella's across the room instantly. "Miss Austen," the man addressed her. "His Grace requests your presence in the drawing room."

Austrella stiffened on the bed. Had they returned so quickly? She knew she would have to face her uncle and family when they returned, but she felt unprepared. She let out a shaky breath. "I'm coming," she answered tensely, getting to her feet.

Marilee shot her a worried look and Austrella returned her the same before following the man to the drawing room.

Her head raced with thoughts on the way. Her knees shook. When they approached the drawing room, she took several deep breaths to calm down and stay resolute.

As the door opened for her, she caught her uncle pacing back and forth. Her heartbeat drummed in her ears as she stepped forward. "Did you call for me?"

Your Grace! Say 'Your Grace' or he will doubt you! Her instincts screamed.

Duke Travis whirled around at her voice, halting at once. His stern gaze met hers. "Yes, come in."

Her trembling legs led her in and the door closed behind her. The atmosphere was tense and she hesitated to meet his eyes.

"My daughter told me she let you come and I hardly believe that, when the rules I have made are strict and no one has ever dared to break them," he said, almost sharply. "But, since His Royal Highness has chosen you, I have no authority to question you. But I would like to know where you got such a gown from. A servant like you can't afford it."

Austrella bit her lip, her eyes on the floor. "I... m-my grandmother... I mean, it's my grandmother's. It's her wedding gown." The lie was bitter in her mouth.

"How did you get there?"

"On a horse. From the stable."

"And who granted you the permission to do so?"

"Aqui—Lady Aquila, Your Grace."

"Hmm? She did not mention such a thing," Duke Travis muttered, silent for a moment before demanding, "Look up." She was forced to meet his eyes. "Do you know why the prince chose you? It is very curious because as you know, he refused to choose in the last three years. Did he tell you why, out of all ladies who'd been waiting for three years, he chose you?" His voice carried a displeased edge.

"N-no?"

"Well then, why did you run away? You enraged His Highness. It is not appropriate to run away from a prince and I was ashamed because you are my servant. You must not do it furthermore; I won't tolerate it again."

Austrella nodded.

"As you know, you will be moving to the palace soon, but before that, you must tell me about yourself, Miss Austen."

Before Austrella could repeat the same story she'd told everyone, the doors swung open, and she spun around to see Aquila bursting in. Her cousin halted as soon as their gazes met. Aquila looked at her father. "Do you mind if I talk with Rella for a moment? I did permit her to come but running away like that wasn't allowed, and I need to talk to her about that."

Austrella was impressed at how truthful her cousin sounded. She glanced between them both.

Duke Travis' expression softened at his daughter's sight. "Of course, you may, my dear—but one more thing, Miss Austen." He paced to Austrella, his eyes turning grave. "I presume you ran away because you didn't want to be chosen, but do not think for once to refuse the prince and enrage him. You must do whatever he wants no matter what. He is the dark prince and if you refuse him, you will endanger the whole country by angering him. So you must be wise not to reject him in anything. It could even cost your life."

Austrella stared at her uncle in fear. Her heart shook at the warning; it chilled every bone in her body. His words reminded her of the grave danger she was in, a danger she could only escape if the prince wouldn't come for her.

Aquila grabbed her hand and pulled her back. Austrella cast a fleeting glance at the grave-looking duke before they left the drawing room. Before long, they reached Aquila's bedroom. Once they were inside, Aquila closed the door behind them and turned to Austrella with her arms crossed.

"So? I did everything you asked. Now, tell me," she said, her tone both desperate and demanding. "Where is my cousin?"

Austrella heaved deeply, the fear of the prince fading as she realized her moment to reveal the truth had come. "She's alive. She escaped the palace and has been away."

Aquila furrowed her eyebrows. "Escaped? How? Wait—First, tell me where is my sister?"

The authority lacing the word *sister* swelled Austrella's heart. Austrella steadied herself. "Aquila," she began slowly, "earlier when we talked before the ball, you said I looked a little familiar, didn't you? What did you mean by that?"

Aquila's eyebrows rose, uncertainty etching on her face. "I do not know. I mean, you do look like someone I might've seen."

"Like who?" Austrella pressed.

"I don't remember who. I just cannot recognize it. But where are you going with this? Tell me where my sister is!" Her voice grew demanding.

Austrella's breathing grew rapid. *This was it.* "Aquila," she called longingly. "She's right here."

A bewildered expression took over her cousin's face. She narrowed her eyes. "Here? What do you mean by *here*?"

Realizing Aquila didn't grasp her meaning, Austrella lifted her wrist, the candlelight casting a glimmer upon her silver bracelet.

Utter disbelief filled Aquila's eyes. Slowly, she stepped forward to see it closely. When she did, she gasped. "This is... I gave this to Austrella—this is hers! How did you get it?"

Tears began to cram Austrella's eyes. "How can you not see her when she's standing right in front of you?"

Aquila's eyes widened like saucers, staring at Austrella in incredulity. "What?"

Austrella finally revealed herself. "Aquila, It's me. I'm Austrella." As soon as she said this, a burden lifted from her shoulders.

Aquila stood frozen, gaping at her in shock, dumbfounded.

Swallowing the lump in her throat, Austrella continued, "It's really me. I escaped on that day of the invasion. Papa and Mama did too, but... Adam... he didn't make it." More tears rushed into her eyes. "We were brought to safety by an enchanter friend. He took us far away and kept us in secret all these years. I changed; I changed a lot, so we were confident that no one would recognize me. Papa and Mama wanted me to live my life and I chose to come here, to work here so I will get to see you."

Her cousin remained frozen.

She continued solemnly, "I swear I wanted to tell you this on the very day I came here, but I couldn't. I knew you would not tell anyone, yet, I feared if I voiced it, someone might hear and it would endanger my family. So I couldn't risk it. You have no idea how broken I was when none of you recognized me. But I couldn't blame you, I have changed so much. But it's me. It is still me. I'm not dead, Aquila, I'm right here."

Tears spilled down Aquila's cheeks, she shook her head in disbelief. "I-is that... is it really you?" Her voice shook.

Austrella was overwhelmed that she was afraid she would lose control over her restrained sobs. She nodded. "It is. I have been dying to tell you this. It is really me. And... and the reason why I broke the rules to get to the ball was to see the palace. My home. I wanted to see the place I grew up, and that is why I was desperate. And my mother sent me the slippers her mother had made before; enchanted slippers that transformed my dress into the gown I wore. My grandmother made it, that's the reason she is now weak. She was at the ball and saw me but I ran away..." *And met a stranger in the maze.* "Aquila, you have no idea how much I wished you would recognize me, I thought it was... impossible."

Aquila didn't even blink as she kept staring in disbelief. Several times she attempted to speak but failed, and at last, she managed to say, "S-so it makes... sense. Why you... why you looked familiar." Her voice cracked. "I even told Alondra that you... you reminded me of... Ella."

Austrella's lips parted in surprise. "You recognized me?"

“N-not quite. Not really. I just thought you looked a little like her, and your eyes... the same as her—I even told it to Alondra but... I didn’t know! I...” Her voice kept breaking, tears streaming from her eyes. “I can’t believe this.” Her hands clasped over her mouth.

Then abruptly, she stepped forth and crashed Austrella into a hug.

Austrella hugged her back, tears freely rolling down her face. She had dreamed of this moment for ten years but never thought it would ever be fulfilled. Her heart swelled with joy to be finally reunited and recognized. The room blurred as they clung to each other as if trying to bridge the chasm of a decade that had separated them.

“Tell me this is real!” Aquila’s voice choked with emotions. “T-tell me this is not a dream—tell me it’s really you.” She sobbed.

“I’m here. It is real, I promise. It’s really me.”

Then, Aquila pulled away to hold Austrella at arm’s length, staring at her in disbelief. “I cannot believe it’s really you,” she whispered, her voice trembling with incredulity and relief.

“I’ve missed you so much.” Austrella’s own voice choked with emotions.

Aquila pulled her cousin into another fierce embrace, her sobs muffled by Austrella’s shoulder. “I-I... I thought you were gone forever,” she confessed, her words heavy.

“I’m so sorry, Aquila, sorry that I couldn’t tell you earlier or come back sooner. I never wanted to leave you. But I had no choice.”

They held each other tightly for a long time. Austrella was consumed by a flood of emotions, and she couldn’t thank the Creator enough for this moment. Aquila took a long time to stop crying; she couldn’t stop hugging her and telling her how much she had missed her. Austrella couldn’t stop either, and she kept assuring her cousin this was real.

Austrella was touched to realize that only the years had gone away but not their sisterly bond.

Aquila pulled back, her eyes searching Austrella’s face for answers. “Tell me everything,” she implored. “Tell me where you’ve been all these years.”

And Austrella recounted her story.

Once she was done, Aquila apologized for her unpleasant behavior towards her. “I used to be so close with every worker here. That was until we came to

realize that two of them sided with the dark prince—one of them were really close to my father and he often went to the castle with him. He helped the dark prince overthrow your family. I don't know how exactly, but it's true. So, ever since then, I was restricted from mingling with the workers so much. That's why Papa made such rules."

Austrella felt remorseful for having thought poorly of her uncle. When Aquila told her that her father was unlike himself ever since they believed she and her family were dead, Austrella felt more awful. But a question lingered in her. "But I heard that Uncle has sided with the dark prince. Why?"

Aquila answered her softly, "I hate it, Ella, we all do, but it's for the safety of our lives. He is just pretending. We all are. We actually hate him. Did you really think we would *genuinely* side with him? No, I would never do that! You have no idea how angry I was when I thought you were dead. But oh, how can I ever thank the Creator enough for—" A knock on the door interrupted her.

Austrella exchanged glances with her, fearing that the one at the door heard them.

Aquila cleared her throat before calling out, "Come in!"

Opening the door, a servant stepped in. "Miss Austen, His Grace asks for your presence in the drawing room this instant."

Austrella sighed, a knot forming in her chest at the thought of talking with her uncle now that he was curious about her. She turned to Aquila. "I should go, but we will talk soon I promise."

"I swear I will not go to bed until you tell me everything."

Austrella laughed lightly at her response and nodded before standing from the couch they occupied and walking to the door. She walked behind the man who led the way to the drawing room, preparing her answers to her uncle's expected questions about her family.

The man opened the door for her, and as she entered, her eyes immediately fell on Prince Liven perched on a couch, conversing with Travis.

No.

Austrella came to a halt as though there was an invisible wall in front of her. Liven's gaze met hers immediately, making her heart skip a beat.

Oh, no, no, no!

The danger she had escaped from had now come looking for her. The courage she had summoned to face her uncle now slipped away.

She had not expected him to come for her in the dead of the night.

Liven stood at the sight of her, holding something sparkling in his hands. "Ella." As his voice called her name softly, a sudden gust of heat burst in her, making her stiff.

Her eyes dropped to his hands and she recognized the shimmering object he held. It was her glass slipper, the one she had left behind in her hasty escape.

"You left this behind," he said, his voice gentle where she'd expected him to be mad.

However, the gentleness in his voice made the anger within her surge. The events of the night, when he enchanted her, played in her head like a reminder. But looking back at his face, she felt a strange tug in her heart.

"What are you doing here?" she managed to ask.

"Bringing this back to you." He gestured at the slipper. "Come, sit," he said, motioning to the armchair he had occupied.

Austrella hesitated, parting her lips to speak, but she gave up eventually. Careful not to look into his eyes, she complied reluctantly, perching on the chair while keeping her guard up.

Liven crouched before her, holding the glass slipper cautiously. His proximity ignited her, just like he'd done before. She feared he was using the same spell to enchant her again.

She clenched her fists, determined not to succumb.

"I'm actually surprised you left behind something so precious," Liven said. "Did you not notice or did you purposely leave it behind, so I will come and get you?" The warmth in his voice compelled her gaze to meet his. When her eyes found his, her heart rate increased.

No. She thought; her jaw clenched as if to resist any enchantment. *I will not let him get me again.* "No, if I had gone back to take it, I wouldn't have been able to run away at all." Her retort was quick and sharp.

A faint look of surprise flashed across his features. "Why did you run away?"

"Because you chose me against my will," Austrella spoke distastefully through gritted teeth.

"You said *yes*," Liven said, a flicker of something beneath his princely façade. "I know I told you I wouldn't change my decision, but I gave you a chance to confess your answer willingly and you told me *yes*."

Austrella's anger burned hot beneath her skin. She narrowed her eyes at him. "Because you enchanted me," she accused. "You put me under some sort of spell!"

The prince blinked, surprise evident on his face. "Under a spell? What are you talking about?"

"You enchanted me," she insisted, her voice edged with bitterness. "You enchanted me to tell you yes, to surrender to you!"

Liven stared at her, disbelief etched on his face before a glint of amusement swept in. "You think I enchanted you to say yes? Ella, I have no such power. Even if I have, I would never do that."

"You enchanted me," Austrella repeated, her tone growing defiant. "Do not lie, I know you did. You were enchanting, and you know it."

"I don't have such powers, Ella."

Austrella groaned inwardly, barely holding back the urge to throw a fist at Liven's extremely gorgeous face. "Do you think I'm going to believe that when I know I'm not stupid enough to say yes to you? And did you really think I would not find out? It broke soon as you stepped away, and I realized what I was doing—what your *enchantment* made me do! Not only saying yes but something horrible."

His eyebrows rose, amusement unmistakable in his eyes, which drove her even madder. "I enchanted you to do something... *what* horrible?"

Austrella clenched her jaw tighter, her frustration flaring. "To... to fall in *love* with you."

Liven's lips parted, the lips that had met hers and had kissed her—she looked away immediately. She couldn't believe she was staring at his lips. Just one thought of the kiss made her shoulders rise and fall tensely.

"Fall in love?" Liven's question turned her gaze back to his, his voice sounding genuinely confused. "Ella, once again, I possess no such power."

Austrella pressed her lips into a thin line, her irritation increasing at his amusement. "Oh, you do. You did. You had me under your spell, and you *made* me fall for you," she retorted, ignoring the waves of the strange heat.

The prince looked away, shaking his head before returning his gaze, his smile concealed. "Look, had I such power and I enchanted you, I could've easily put you under that spell right now and taken you with me without having my ears suffer your sharp tongue. And don't forget," he poked a finger, "even after you said yes, you pulled away from me in uncertainty. If I had enchanted you, I could've made you feel no hesitancy. But you were still unsure, were you not? Think, Ella. When I asked for your answer, you told me I murdered the previous royal family. If I had you under some sort of spell, you wouldn't have said so."

Austrella's lips parted and closed repeatedly. She shook her head in disagreement, refusing to believe he *hadn't* enchanted her. Now she was speechless, his words had her thinking, as though they made sense and proved she was wrong. She shook her head in disbelief again, her gaze dropping from him.

Austrella couldn't believe it, because all that she felt for him, around him... They had to be enchanted.

They *had* to be unreal.

"So, you found me enchanting?"

Her eyes snapped to his in shock. "That's not what I meant—"

"That's exactly what it sounds like. You found me enchanting, and you were enchanted."

"I do not believe you! You did put me under some spell!"

"His Highness does not have any enchanting powers, Miss Austen," Travis spoke, almost startling her with his grave voice. She had almost forgotten he was present. When she met his gaze, he shot her a meaningful glance as if to warn her to stop arguing with the prince. "No one born with magic has such powers."

"So, you fell in love with me?"

Austrella's gaze snapped to Liven's, startled by his words, and found him smiling with a raised eyebrow. "No," she protested curtly. Her cheeks flushed with anger and embarrassment. "Of course not, that's the last thing I will ever do."

His lips twitched up into a smirk, undeniably beautiful, his eyes dancing with amusement. "Oh, I think you're saying that you fell for my enchanting ways."

Austrella scowled. "I don't believe you," she said. The urge to wipe off his smirk was almost unbearable. "And I think you're making fun of me."

He leaned forward, still in his crouching position with the slipper in his hands. "I assure you, I have no such power to enchant someone's heart or their feelings. Whatever you felt were your own true feelings." His expression was sincere. "And from the look of it, it seems like you really think on your own that I'm *enchanting*."

Her frustration swelled, his words forming a flurry of questions. "Oh, don't flatter yourself, because I don't think you are."

Her guard was slipping, along with her resoluteness, as his words formed a new sense of fear within her. As much as she hated to admit it, he had proved that he did *not* enchant her, which meant what she felt was...

Austrella felt sick with worry.

Was everything she felt not compelled but real? Was the dance truly magical like the dances her mother had told her about? So magical that it would make them fall madly in love, magical enough that it would make them forget everything else.

Did she really say yes on her own?

"Ella? Ella, are you alright?" Liven's voice brought her back to the present, his eyes no longer filled with mirth.

Austrella looked away from him quickly, nodding dumbly. *I don't feel anything for him*, she convinced herself.

"Do you have the other slipper with you?" His question brought her gaze back to him.

"I won't give it to you," she said sharply.

Travis cleared his throat loudly, turning her attention to him, and shot her a meaningful glance. *You must do whatever he wants no matter what...* She remembered his warning.

"My powers sensed that this slipper holds an enchantment," Liven spoke, his eyebrows furrowed as he ran his fingers over the slipper's surface. "Do you know what it is?"

Austrella froze in her chair and gaped at him in shock.

She was cornered. He could sense the magic in her slipper, and lying to him would be foolish. "It transformed my dress into the white gown I wore tonight," she admitted.

A flicker of surprise danced across Liven's features. Then he asked, gesturing to the slipper, "May I?"

Left with no choice, Austrella gave a tight nod. An electric power swept through her when he held her heel with a small caress that enveloped her in heated feelings. Once he placed the slipper on her foot, his ocean eyes met hers.

"May I see the other slipper?"

"Why, *Prince Liven*?"

He smiled. "You'll see, my princess."

Austrella averted her gaze, nearly scoffing.

"I just want to see it. Besides, we are leaving now, to go back to the castle."

Protest surged within her, but then resignation followed. There was no other option. Sighing sharply in defeat—hearing which seemed to grow his smile—she pulled out the other slipper from the pocket of her dress and handed it to him reluctantly.

Then, right before her eyes, he placed the slipper on her other foot. A sudden glow emanated from the slippers. She rose from her chair. Liven did the same and backed away. Like before, the glow spun around her and enveloped her in the light. This time, instead of closing her eyes, she glanced down to see her servant uniform transform into a resplendent white gown.

Austrella's eyes eagerly sought Liven's, and she found him staring at her with his lips parted, his ocean eyes gleaming with wonder. He stared at her as if she was an angel, as if she was wonder itself, and there was more to his expression that she couldn't read.

"You look indeed like a bride, *my* bride," he said, his voice laced with awe.

Instead of anger, a deep blush crept onto her face, and she glanced away, feeling a tingle in her stomach at his stare.

"Who made such a wonder?"

"A... a friend," she stammered. "I'm a servant, Your Highness, and I have no gown, so my friend gave this to me for the ball." It was her last chance to convince him of who she was.

"You said it was your grandmother's," Travis said suddenly, his tone suspicious.

Austrella paled. "I-I..."

“Excuse my princess, Duke Travis.” Liven interjected, his voice calm yet authoritative. “She’s just a little overwhelmed.”

Despite her irritation towards him, a flicker of gratitude for the intervention washed over her.

“Since you’re ready, I believe it’s time to leave for the palace.”

Austrella moved her gaze up to him, words flooding her mind, but nothing came out. She took a step back. “I... *now?*”

Liven nodded. “You won’t stay here anymore. From now on, you are not a servant. You’re moving to the castle.”

Her mouth opened to protest, trying to sharpen her voice to emphasize her words. “Whatever I told you at the dance was... was... not by me—I might’ve *unconsciously* sa—”

“You will not refuse His Highness,” Travis interjected. She turned to earn a sharp glare from him. A meaningful one.

He is the dark prince and if you refuse him, you will endanger the whole country by angering him...

His warning echoed in her head, a tendril of fear wrapping around her heart. She knew she couldn’t escape, yet she was trying.

Her uncle must be right not to enrage him. Liven wouldn’t look like he was capable of doing such an act, but there was so much to him behind the smile he wore. So much darkness. And she knew he was more than capable. That he was a monster.

The safety of her kingdom’s weight burdened her, leaving her with no other choice. Agreeing was not the best but the safe choice.

Austrella chose the love for her kingdom over her hatred for him and sighed in defeat. “Fine, then. You win. But don’t think for once that I want this. It will be the last thing to happen on this earth.”

Her sharp tongue longed to say more, but she couldn’t risk it.

A playful smile flickered across Liven’s lips. “I can’t wait to start my life with you, Princess.”

She scowled. “Can’t wait either.”

CHAPTER 7 | TRAPPED

Austrella could hardly hold back her anger as she hurried towards the main exit of the manor, her hand gripped firmly by Liven. Liven matched her pace; his fingers caressing hers as they were intertwined, and all those heated tugs inside terrified her. She hardly resisted the urge to pull her hand away.

Duke Travis trailed behind them with a stern expression on his face, appearing displeased. Before they reached the imposing doors of the manor, a voice pierced the air, halting Austrella in her tracks.

“Wait!” Her heart rose in desperation as she recognized the voice—Aquila.

She turned swiftly, her eyes widening in surprise as she saw her cousin sprinting towards them; her face full of concern.

Austrella left Liven’s side, rushing to meet her cousin halfway. Aquila flung her arms around Austrella in a tight embrace. Austrella feared Travis’ suspicion witnessing them acting close, but not knowing when she would see her again, she hugged her back.

“You mustn’t leave,” Aquila’s voice was so quiet, safe from reaching Liven’s ears. They stood several feet away from the two men. “It’s dangerous, Ella. He’s... he’s the dark prince. If he learns who you are, he will... he will *kill* you. You can’t go—you mustn’t. You’ll be in more danger.”

“I have no choice, Aquila. If I refuse him strongly, he’ll rage, and who knows what he’ll do. You know I cannot escape. You know what’s at stake,” she whispered back vigilantly.

“I know, but this is awful. If he learns—”

“He won’t.” She dropped her voice quieter and cut off her words, determined to shield her cousin from further pain. “He won’t, Aquila. I will be careful, I promise. But I can’t refuse him. Uncle warned me so. Refusing him would rage

him and it would risk not only my life but also the lives of our people. You understand, right?”

“Yes, but it’s terrifying, Ella. If he discovers... I can’t bear the thought of losing you again...”

Tears pooled in Austrella’s eyes, causing her to hug her cousin tighter. “I have no other choice than going with him, and you know why. But I promise to be careful, okay? Now, I must go. We have much to discuss, but it will have to wait. We will see each other again. If I don’t go now, he might suspect something, and we can’t risk that. Promise me, Aquila; promise me you will not tell anyone about me.”

Aquila broke apart from the hug reluctantly. Her eyes were crammed with tears. “The last time I was helpless, but this time, I would do anything to save you. I will save you from him, without risking your life. I promise. Father and I will figure this out.”

Austrella shook her head, feeling fear clawing at her. There was no wrong in telling her uncle, she was certain. But it was better and safer if no one else knew the secret. If her uncle learned about her secrets, he might try to reach out to her parents and it might put them in danger.

“You can’t tell him. It’s better if no one knows. Please, I trust you.”

“Then trust me to save you from the lion’s den. We will find a way to get you out of there, I promise.” Aquila’s resolve remained unshaken.

Panic filled Austrella’s eyes. “No, Aquila, you don’t... you don’t understand the risk—”

“No, Ella, *you* don’t understand. I will not let anyone take you away again.”

Austrella wanted to protest until Aquila gave up, but she was aware of Liven and Travis’ watchful gaze. “I need to go,” she breathed hurriedly. “But I promise, I will be careful and find a way out by myself. Just don’t do anything risky, please.”

“I will do anything to save you.” Aquila’s determination was unwavering. “And I will miss you. I hate him more now, for taking you away as soon as I got you back.” She glared past Austrella’s shoulder.

“I will see you one day,” she whispered, swallowing her protests. Giving her cousin one last pleading look, she returned to Liven’s side where she was welcomed with tingling feelings.

Liven clasped her hand as soon as she approached his side, her eyes on the floor, holding back her tears. "Are you alright?" Liven inquired softly, his gentleness fueling her frustration. His voice, gentle or not, tugged her heartstrings each time.

Austrella lowered her eyes even more, hiding her tears from him. She nodded in response.

"Are you ready?"

Why couldn't he just drag her out and not wait for her answer? She didn't want to hear his voice, especially the gentle one. It made her heart race faster than it already did in his proximity.

She nodded again.

Liven led her to the front doors. As they stepped outside into the courtyard, Austrella's breath caught in her throat. There stood a magnificent carriage; its body gleaming with a rich, golden hue that shimmered in the soft glow the lanterns outside and inside it cast.

The sight of the carriage paused her in her tracks, and Liven tugged her towards it gently. Austrella's pace was slow and he was patient with her. She examined it in awe; it was a masterpiece of elegance and luxury, a fit for a princess. The windows were framed with gold, and the glass panes were so clear that they sparkled like diamonds. Simultaneously it appeared to be made of gold and magic.

However, when she neared the carriage, suddenly, she caught a glimpse of a figure in dark robes standing a few feet away from the carriage, the man's familiar gaze on her.

It was Lorcan.

"Excuse me," muttering to Liven, Austrella hurried towards her godfather figure.

She was surprised he hadn't left, and then realization dawned on her. He must've been at the ball and witnessed everything.

Lorcan met her halfway and she threw herself into his arms, hugging him. The control over her sobs slipped slightly.

"I can't believe this happened," Lorcan murmured, stroking her hair. "I'm sorry this happened, Ella. But I promise we will figure out how to get you out of this." His voice was equally quiet and resolute.

Tears welled up in Austrella's eyes as she clung to him. His words had always encouraged her, except now.

"I will be alright, Lorcan," she whispered through her tears. "Just tell my parents I will be careful, I will be safe and no one will know about—or perhaps you shouldn't tell them anything at all. Just tell them I have met someone and am slowly planning my future. I—it's better that way. They should not worry; they should be happy. And don't worry about me, I will find a way to escape."

Lorcan pulled away and nodded, his gaze filled with worry and determination. "I will tell them what I must. But, Ella, please, do not fret. We will find a way out of this soon."

Austrella nodded, wiping away her tears, but her sobs threatened to overwhelm her. "I will be careful. Just tell my parents I love them."

Lorcan smiled warmly and nodded, his eyes flickering past her towards Liven, who stood at a distance and seemed to be watching them. He brought his gaze back to her. "I will tell them. And I swear, at the end of the day, he *will* pay for this."

He glanced at Liven again, his expression hardening. Austrella stepped back hesitantly, craning her neck to glance at the prince who eyed Lorcan with the same hardening expression.

"I must go." She panicked and turned away, walking back to Liven.

Liven's gaze moved to hers slowly and he held out his hand to her. Frustration swelled in her. Why couldn't he just *not* hold her hand? A tingle passed down her spine when she accepted it.

"Who was that?" he asked.

Austrella hesitated at first, and then said, "A... just a friend."

When there was no response or movement from Liven, she looked up to see him glancing at Lorcan with furrowed eyebrows. "Is he... He is an enchanter, isn't he?"

Panic clawed at her for no apparent reason. "How do you know?"

His ocean eyes fell back on her, making her gulp. "He does look like one."

She waited, as he seemed like he wanted to ask more questions, but he didn't. Instead, he turned to the open carriage and helped her in.

The interior of the carriage was as magnificent as its exterior. The seats dipped in red were plush and comfortable. Austrella settled into her seat, and

Liven followed suit.

The doors closed with a soft thud, and the carriage began to move. Through the glass door on Liven's side, she caught Aquila and her father standing at the threshold of the manor. Aquila waved and sent her a flying kiss—their old-fashioned way of saying goodbye. Completely ignoring the dark prince beside her, Austrella did the same.

"Oh, is that for me?" Liven mused.

Austrella glared. "In your dreams, *Your Royal Highness*."

She turned to gaze out of the window at her side. In silence, pretending to be unaffected by his proximity, she watched as they passed through the manor gates, and to her surprise, saw a small crowd of people gathered outside. Most were guests from the ball, she recognized by their dresses. Her mouth opened, and she inched close to the window.

What are they doing here?

"They just wanted to see if I was able to get back my bride," Liven remarked with a smirk, as though reading her mind.

Austrella turned to throw him a narrowed, disbelieving look before turning back to the window. People moved out of the way, looking into the carriage eagerly, and met her gaze. Then she realized they were *indeed* waiting for the prince to get back his bride.

Austrella hesitated at first, but then, the princess in her urged her to wave. With a reluctant smile, she raised her hand and gave a small wave. The onlookers waved back.

"Well, now, that's a good sign," Liven said mirthfully.

She ignored him and rolled her eyes. Before long, she lost sight of the people as the carriage began its journey to the palace. She released a sigh before leaning back in her seat, only to stiffen when her shoulder met his. She moved aside, creating distance between them.

"So," Liven broke the uncomfortable silence between them. "Since you realized that whatever you felt for me was from your heart, tell me, did you really find me enchanting?"

Austrella scowled, her frustration deepening. Here she thought this conversation was over. "I didn't find you enchanting at all."

"But did you not say that you fell in love with me? Yes, you did, twice—"

She lost her control and snapped her gaze to him. "I did not!" she exclaimed, her face flushed with embarrassment.

As much as it vexed her, Liven's smile was undeniably gorgeous.

Oh Creator, why does the enemy have to be so beautiful?

"You did. *Twice*. You told me—"

"I told you that you *made* me fall in love with you! That, you cast some sort of spell to make me fall in love with you—"

"Which I didn't." His eyes danced with amusement as he stared at her.

Her anger flared while her stomach fluttered. "*Which* I still don't believe."

"You don't have any other options."

Austrella shook her head, fighting back a smile. "You know what, let me be honest. You are actually infuriating," she spoke bluntly.

Liven's eyebrows rose and he leaned back. "Infuriating? And here I thought I was enchanting to you."

He angered her, yes, but also tore through her angry walls and pulled out a smile. Then it turned into a smirk, her irritation momentarily forgotten.

"Then you must know that you, Prince Liven, are a master of infuriation, not enchantment."

His eyes flickered before he frowned, feigning hurt. "I'm truly wounded by your words, my princess."

Austrella rolled her eyes, but there was a warmth that he radiated that she couldn't ignore, which had surrounded her since the moment she met him. But even in the midst of it, she was cautious about his true nature, it would come out any moment. This was all a façade, a trap for her heart.

"That's better," she muttered.

"I see you're—"

"I came with you without a *serious* fight, and I'm not planning on jumping out of this carriage to escape, so can you please stop talking for once, as a favor for me?"

The smile on his face fell; his face now unreadable if not stern—thank the Creator. He stared at her for a short moment before nodding, "If that's what you want, then so be it."

Austrella leaned back into her seat.

The rest of the journey followed in silence. Once her gaze was fixed on the window, his gaze was on her, so intense as if he wanted to burn her in her seat.

Silence was more uncomfortable than she imagined because she could think of nothing but him.

Nothing but his enchanting ocean eyes. Nothing but his alluring voice. Nothing but his fiery proximity.

As they neared the palace, the scenery began to change. Moving over the bridge, Austrella caught sight of the walls of the castle, most covering the view of the magnificent building. Soon enough, the carriage passed through the gates and came to a gentle stop in the palace courtyard. Austrella finally tore her gaze away from the window.

The door opened, and Liven stepped out of the carriage first. He turned to her with an outstretched hand. Austrella hesitated for a brief moment, knowing that she was perfectly capable of disembarking on her own, but she accepted his assistance. That was how princesses did it, after all.

As she descended from the carriage, her eyes closely met with a sight that left her momentarily breathless. It wasn't the grandeur of the castle or the beauty of the courtyard that caught her attention.

No, it was the prince himself.

Her gaze locked onto the depths of Liven's ocean eyes, and she couldn't look away. They were deep and enchanting. His eyes held a certain intensity that seemed like trying to peer into her very soul. The way he looked at her made her heart race, and she quickly averted her gaze, flustered.

Clearing his throat, Liven looked away as well.

Then, she felt his hand tracing down her arm until he caught her hand and intertwined their fingers. Austrella couldn't deny the effect he had on her since the encounter in the maze. Yet she didn't want to think or believe that the feelings formed at the dance were real, from her heart.

Liven's deep, rich voice fell in her ears. "Welcome to your new home, Ella."

Austrella swallowed hard, her throat suddenly dry. This wasn't her *new* home; it was her *home*, it always had been until she was thrown away. He had torn her away from her home, and now he had forced her back.

How ironic!

“Come.” Liven led her to the stairs of the entrance. Her steps were slow and measured as if she feared she might stumble with tension.

Surprising her, Liven matched her pace, showing an unexpected patience. They walked past the grand doors of the castle into the vast entrance hall. Walking forward, her attention was suddenly drawn to a figure in royal robes approaching them. He wore a golden crown.

Austrella realized it was the king. Hesitancy clenched her heart. She stopped slowly, instinctively tugged on Liven’s hand, bringing him to a stop as well.

Liven looked down at her in surprise. “That’s my father. Come on.” He gently pulled her to walk with him towards the approaching king.

The king had no friendly look; his demeanor was so serious and calculating. He halted a few feet away from them, hands clasped behind him.

Liven’s hand left hers, only to place it on her back while his other hand reached for the one he left, intertwining their fingers. Austrella didn’t meet the king’s gaze until they approached him.

“Father, this is her, Ella, my bride.”

The king didn’t smile. His narrowed eyes bore into her. Austrella couldn’t help but feel small under his scrutinizing gaze. His gaze was unsettling and even brought a new sense of fear in her.

She looked away. She felt so uncomfortable that she even moved closer to Liven, instinctively, as if seeking refuge.

Austrella felt his body against hers stiffen, but then he relaxed and wrapped his arm around her.

“What a pleasure to have you in the family, Ella,” the king greeted her finally. However, his tone was far from welcoming. His following question brought up her gaze. “Are you the daughter of a nobleman?”

Austrella glanced up at Liven. She didn’t know what was happening to her, but she found comfort in his proximity before the creepy king.

Liven cleared his throat. “She is—”

“I’m a servant,” she interrupted Liven, her voice lacking resoluteness.

“Servant? Oh, that’s... unexpected,” the king remarked, his tone dripping with condescension. “Son, I know we invited everyone, but—”

“You told me to choose anyone I like, and here I am. I’m choosing her. I’ve *chosen* her,” Liven interrupted his father with more sternness than she

remembered him using towards her. "She is not like any other girls."

Austrella wanted to be disapproved and sent away more than anything, but seeing him defend her against his father and standing up for her caused a strange warmth to bloom in her chest.

The king was less than pleased with Liven's declaration. He nodded rigidly and added, "Yes, but I told you... it should be someone deserving..."

Austrella's jaw tightened. She decided that she hated the king more than she hated the prince. Especially because he wore her father's crown.

The tension in the room was palpable. Liven's grip on Austrella's hand tightened. "She's more than deserving," Liven asserted with a note of finality. "You will not say anything about this, because this is *my* choice, and she is going to be the princess whether you *or* she like it or not."

Austrella's eyes snapped to him in surprise and saw his eyes locked with his father's, both men exchanging fierce glares. Her pulse quickened.

She couldn't understand the depth of Liven's determination to have her.

The king said nothing. Liven met her gaze. "Come on, Ella; let's get you to your room."

They walked past the king. Liven led her towards the royal wing, and instead of looking around and taking in the surroundings, her thoughts were consumed by him and she barely noticed the way.

Entering the royal suit, Liven led her towards a certain room. And when Austrella stepped inside, her breath caught in her throat.

It was *her* room, the one she had used ten years ago. Her memories flooded back. It used to be all messy then, but now it was all tidy and glistening.

"This room belonged to Princess Austrella," Liven's voice broke through the silence and her shoulders stiffened at her name. "I know you're not a princess yet, but I wanted you to have this. It's yours now."

Austrella wished she could tell him how idiotic he sounded.

She walked further into the room, her eyes darting around, taking in every detail. The room was adorned with beautiful tapestries, and the grand bed with its canopy looked fit for a royal. The chandelier above cast a soft glow over the room.

Memories hung in the air. Voices from the past filled the atmosphere and she barely held back her tears.

“You must be tired from the journey. You should go to bed soon. Your maid will soon arrive to assist you. If you need me, my room is next to yours.”

Austrella didn't turn around. If he saw her now, her tears would speak volumes for her secrets. So she settled into nodding.

Liven declared his leave and turned for the door. As his footsteps receded, she turned and saw him close the door behind him. Austrella's heart remained racing as she turned back to look around the room once again. Her thoughts were in a whirlwind of memories. She took small steps forward, tears flooding her eyes.

Then, unexpectedly, the door opened and Liven's voice cut through the silence.

“Ella,” he called softly.

Startled, she turned to see him standing at the doorway, his expression inscrutable. Her tearful eyes met his unreadable ones.

“Goodnight.”

She nodded reluctantly. “G-goodnight.”

They stared at each other for a moment. Then, with a slow, deliberate step backward, Liven closed the door behind him, leaving her alone in the room once more. She was overwhelmed by the whirlwind of heated feelings he gave her.

Tears streamed down her face.

What was happening to her? What was the strange feeling she was having?

Was the enthrallment she felt natural? She found herself believing his words that he hadn't used any spell on her, but she didn't want to believe it was her own feelings either.

Because... it was dangerous.

Before long, a maid arrived to assist her. But as Austrella wished to be alone, she kindly sent her away before going into the closet and got changed herself. She took off the slippers and kept them hidden in her closet.

Walking back to her room, she looked around, each memory flashing in her mind. But they only drove her to be miserable, each and every one a reminder of Adam.

Finally, closing the door to her thoughts and heaving a heavy sigh, she made her way to the grand bed. Only then did she register the great exhaustion from the big event that had flipped her life.

She slipped under the covers. Closing her eyes, she quickly fell into slumber.

Austrella registered a distant sound of knocking that gradually nudged her into consciousness. Slowly, she came out from the depths of sleep and opened her eyes.

Her surroundings confused her at first. She blinked as she looked around. As the fog in her mind lifted away, realization struck her like a bolt of lightning and she remembered everything.

She was no longer in her simple room at her uncle's manor. She was at the palace. In her old room.

The knocking on the door continued. With a start, she called out, "Come in?"

Still tucked beneath the warmth of the covers, she watched as the door opened, revealing the unexpected visitor. Her eyes widened in surprise seeing Liven standing there, his presence making her heart skip a beat and the air filled with a sudden heat.

"Oh, you're awake." He walked in and shut the door behind him.

"What are you doing here?" Austrella asked sharply. "It's not appropriate to enter a lady's room when she's in bed."

Liven raised an eyebrow. "I don't care about rules, Ella, though I'm quite *unaware* of such a rule. Besides, I thought you might be comfortable if *I* checked on you instead of a maid you're unfamiliar with. Don't want you to start your day with discomfort. I've been checking in on you for hours and you weren't waking up."

"Hours?" She rubbed her eyes to clear the morning drowsiness.

"Yes, it's two past noon now." Liven nodded, his hands casually tucked into his pockets.

Austrella gasped, eyes widening in shock. "*Two* past noon?" She jolted upright, her hair tousled from sleep. "You've got to be joking! Did I really sleep that long?"

Liven shrugged nonchalantly, his lips quivering at the corners. "Well, it was already two past midnight when you went to bed. You must've been really tired. I've been too, so I decided not to wake you up."

Austrella felt embarrassment for having him witness her sleepy state and annoyance at herself for oversleeping, *and* the odd blush she couldn't quite hide. She scooted out of her bed, muttering, "I can't believe this!" as she began folding her blanket.

But as she glanced at the clock on her bedside table, her jaw nearly dropped. She gasped. "It's only nine in the morning, Liven!" she shouted, her gaze snapped back to Liven with an accusatory glare. "*Nine!*"

"Well, *Princess*." Liven smirked, casually leaning against the bed frame. "There might be a problem with your eyes because what it is and what I see is two o'clock."

Austrella groaned in anger and stamped her foot on the floor. "You lied to me! You're messing with me, aren't you?"

Liven chuckled, seemingly unperturbed by her fury. "Messing with you? I'm afraid I do not understand what you meant. But let me be honest, there is a serious problem with your eyes. It is two past noon."

Her irritation and annoyance peaked, making her groan again. "You liar, you ruined my sleep!" She scowled and, in her fury, snatched a nearby pillow and threw it at him with all her might.

The pillow hit him in the chest.

Liven burst out with laughter, catching the pillow before it fell to the floor. "Feisty, I like that." He tossed it onto the bed, shooting her a smirk. "You surely are in a good mood today. I will never forget your reaction."

"You are impossible!" she hissed. "Now get out here! I don't want to see you again."

A wicked smile played on his lips. "You're stuck with me, Ella."

Glaring, Austrella turned away. She liked the way her name came out of his mouth, and she hated the fact she liked it. "Don't remind me." She gritted her teeth, continuing to fold the blanket.

"I don't think I can stop it, my love."

"My love?" Austrella spun around and jabbed a finger at him. "Call me that again and I *will* murder you in your sleep."

"I cannot help it, my love." Liven smirked. "Anyway, we have a whole day ahead of us. What would you like to do?"

"I'd like to spend the rest of the day away from you," she answered abruptly.

“That’s impossible. And by the way, we’re going to have breakfast together now.”

Her eyes turned to his defiantly. “I won’t dine with your father.”

Liven smiled, one that seemed genuine, and she immediately looked away. She was being somewhat successful in pretending he didn’t affect her, and she didn’t want to ruin it by staring at his non-teasing smiles. “Lucky for you, he’s already eaten. It’ll just be the two of us. Isn’t that glorious?”

“I’ll dine alone, and *that’s* glorious.”

“You can’t escape me.”

She huffed and twisted her hair into a loose bun.

“Our life is going to be so fun, isn’t it?”

Her annoyance peaked. “I swear, I will make your life as terrible as possible.”

“Oh, I highly doubt that. With you, nothing is terrible.”

In a fit of frustration, Austrella spun around, grabbed a nearby pillow, and hurled it towards him, but it missed. It instead flew past him and fell on the floor. He laughed. “You’re such a talented aimer, aren’t you?”

Austrella couldn’t hold her frustration anymore. She laughed with him, a genuine smile breaking onto her face.

CHAPTER 8 | LUMINESCENCE

Eyes wandering around the grand dining room, Austrella chewed on her food. For the last ten years, she wasn't used to lavish surroundings and she could barely keep her eyes on the plate.

The room was magnificent, just as she remembered. The table was adorned with fine china, crystal glasses, and a collection of dishes. Her eyes flickered over the tapestries that lined the walls.

Liven sat across from her, his piercing blue eyes studying her the entire time. She was trying not to pay attention to him by pretending to be *constantly* awed by the surroundings.

"So, Ella." His words turned her gaze to his after a long time of avoiding it. "Tell me about you."

Austrella arched an eyebrow. "Tell you what about me?"

He reached for a piece of fruit and took a leisurely bite. "Everything about you. Your life, your hobbies. I'd like to know you better."

Something tugged in her stomach at his words, but playing cool was her goal. "Better?" She scoffed. "As if you know me even a *little*. Funny, you chose me without knowing a single thing about me. Congratulations, Your Highness, you've entered the greatest nightmare of your life."

Liven stared at her intently, a charming smile playing on his lips. "Please, I *do* know you. I know your name, where you lived, and what you were doing. Also that you're an orphan. Now I want to know everything else about you. Tell me about your life."

"It's funny you're asking this only now."

"Honestly, Ella, I wanted to ask you yesterday itself, to know all about you, but yesterday was a long day. Very long night; choosing you, chasing you, bringing you..."

She rolled her eyes, finding it difficult to maintain her pretend anger for long. “Well then, what do you want to know?”

“Everything.” Liven leaned back in his chair, his gaze never leaving hers. “Every single thing about you, if you’re willing to share.”

Austrella hesitated, dropping her gaze to her plate. “I’d rather not talk about the past. It’s bitter.”

“I won’t force you, Ella. I have a bitter past I’d rather not talk about, too.”

Austrella was surprised. Her gaze darted up to his, her eyebrows lifting. “Really?”

He nodded. “Yes, and I won’t force you to tell me unless you’re ready.”

Austrella twisted her fingers around her fork, pulling up her guard. “And that is never going to happen.”

Liven rolled his eyes before leaning forward, folding his arms on the table. “What’s the name of the enchanter we saw yesterday?”

Her shoulders tensed for no apparent reason. Enchanters were no secret or threat, she knew that for sure, yet somehow to be questioned about the enchanter who had kept them alive unsettled her. She shrugged. “I call him Lorc. He’s just a friend. Why?”

He leaned back. “Nothing. Just asking.”

She quirked an eyebrow. “You sounded suspicious.”

“I had a bad experience with an unknown enchanter once, and I needed to make sure it wasn’t him.”

So he was indeed suspicious.

“Whoever dared to give you a bad experience, I appreciate them.” She lifted her wine glass in the air and drank it.

His eyes darkened as if a shadow fell upon him. “He practically ruined my life.”

Though Austrella was curious about this *bad* experience of his, she decided not to ask, she’d only be forced to tell her past in return—a fake story she hated to repeat. “Whatever you faced, I think you deserve it, because you ruined—*killed* the royal family.”

Liven looked away, appearing frustrated all of a sudden. “We shouldn’t talk about this now.”

“Why not?” she pressed, eager to know his answers, even though she did fear getting onto his bad side. “You’ve chosen me as your bride, and as your bride, I need to talk about this.”

The darkness in his eyes fled and his face softened. “Oh, did you really accept yourself as my bride?”

Austrella flustered. “In your dreams.”

Liven smiled. “So, tell me, what do you like to do the most?”

As she came up with an infuriating answer mentally, the grand doors of the private dining room swung open, and the king entered. Austrella stiffened in her chair. The king’s presence exuded authority and arrogance as his gaze bore into her.

She looked away, giving Liven a narrowed glance. *I thought you said he won’t join us!*

Liven looked from her to his father to offer him a respectful nod. “Good morning, Father. We thought you wouldn’t join us at all.”

The king walked to the table sedately with hands clasped behind him. “I certainly have no plan to join you. I simply came to see the servant girl.” His eyes remained on Austrella. “Ella, isn’t it? The servant girl my son chose.”

Austrella clenched her jaw. *As if there’s someone other than me here.* She fought the urge to roll her eyes and muttered, “Yes.”

The king halted by Liven’s chair. “A rather unexpected and displeasing choice, Liven.”

“This is *my* choice, Father. After three years, I finally made my choice and you will not get to speak about it.” Liven couldn’t conceal his displeasure. He sounded irritated.

“It is not only about her being your bride, Liven. It is about her becoming the future queen. Servants don’t know the first thing about being royal,” the king spoke sharply, his words laced with venom.

“And what is this *first thing*?” Austrella mustered her courage to ask, struggling to keep her voice polite. Her hands shook, she truly had no courage, but she refused to show any weakness.

Liven’s eyes widened while the king’s narrowed. “See, she doesn’t even know how to talk to a king,” he said in revulsion, turning his attention to his son. “Is this the one who is about to be the future queen? She doesn’t know the first

thing about respect.” He marched to the seat at the head of the table and perched on it, eyes fixed on Austrella as if he wanted to teach her.

“She does know respect and she *is* respectful. But as the king and her future father-in-law, *you* have to show her some respect. You treated her disgracefully in the very first meeting, and I will not tolerate it again. She is my *bride*,” Liven stated, his voice unwavering, holding a fierce gaze with his father.

Austrella’s heart pounded erratically. Even after she clearly didn’t show Liven any respect, he defended her. The determination of his claim on her as his bride sent a shudder down her spine.

The king scoffed. “Respect? She’s a commoner, coming from the lowest class—a servant! Not fit for the title of a princess or a queen. I want you to choose someone noble to bear the title of the queen.”

He glared at Liven.

Liven slammed his hand on the table and Austrella nearly jumped. “That’s enough!” His voice thundered through the hall. “We’ve already talked about this, Father. This is my choice, *she* is my choice, and you have no say in this. You told me to find a wife and I have. Ella is the one. I won’t tolerate any further disrespect towards my bride. We are betrothed and I expect you to treat her with the respect she deserves.”

The king’s face contorted with anger. “Fine then. Since I have permitted you to pick anyone you like, I won’t speak against it anymore. But if you really want to marry her, then we must talk. Now, hurry up and meet me before noon in my study.” He stood up abruptly and strode off.

Austrella couldn’t stop shuddering. She might be able to put on a bold face, but she wasn’t bold inside. The presence of the king now terrified her. Once the arrogant king exited the room, her gaze slid to Liven. Her *betrothed*.

How odd.

She hadn’t realized he was her *betrothed* until he’d spoken the word.

Liven’s stern gaze softened when their eyes met. “Ella—”

“It’s okay,” she interrupted breathlessly, averting her eyes. She wanted to be disapproved and rejected as his bride, but somehow, the king’s words weren’t comforting. And her heart warmed an extreme amount when Liven stood up for her.

Liven rose from his chair and walked around the table to her. He pulled out a chair beside her and sat on it.

"Ella, I'm truly sorry about my father." He sighed.

Her emotions were a whirlwind at his proximity, his gentle gaze on her, his voice caressing her name. She looked away, shaking her head. "I-it's fine."

"It's not fine." Liven reached out and held her hand, startling her at the unexpected touch.

Austrella gaped at him in shock as he took her hand from her lap to his, holding it gently. Her shuddering stopped. When he looked into her eyes, her feelings went wilder.

"I hate it, and I won't let anyone, king or not, treat you like that. I will make sure no one will ever speak to you like that again."

Oh Creator, what is happening to me? Austrella couldn't look away nor breathe well. She feared her heart might burst out of her chest or would die with the intense heat he'd placed her in.

What was this feeling? What was he doing to her?

"Now, eat." He jerked his chin towards her plate. "Let's forget my father even came here." Liven's fingers caressed hers.

She nodded.

After she finished her breakfast, Liven gave her a tour of the castle. She clearly remembered every creak and corner, but she appreciated the tour. Though she'd seen everything before, she was left awed. She wondered how she couldn't have noticed the beauty of the castle once when she lived here.

As she continued to explore the castle with Liven, her initial apprehension began to disappear. He showed her various places with the library being the last one, and when they entered, she couldn't believe it was so vast; more vast than she remembered.

The towering bookshelves were filled to the brim with books of all shapes and sizes. She never liked to read when she was little, but ever since her life in the woods began, books became an escape she sought to hide out from reality. Thanks to Lorcan.

"I can't believe it's so huge," she whispered, glancing around breathlessly. She wondered if it was possible to read all these books in a lifetime.

"It's one of my favorite places here," Liven said from behind her. "You can read anything you want if you like. Never hesitate."

Smiling, Austrella meandered through the shelves with Liven trailing behind, her fingers lightly tracing the spines of the books. "Do you like to read?"

"Of course, I often find solace in books. I consider reading as a way to escape, even if just for a little while."

Austrella couldn't stop smiling. She always wanted a library with several books that would never end. She didn't even know her dream library was real in her own castle. She pulled out a book. "What's your favorite book?"

"Ah, that's hard. There are so many, and it's hard to go with just one."

"Spoken like a true bookworm."

"Your Highness!" The firm voice of a man boomed into the library. Austrella turned to see a footman approaching them. He looked familiar; in fact, almost everyone around was familiar. "His Majesty is asking you to join him in his study."

Liven turned to Austrella, his expression apologetic. "I'm terribly sorry, but it seems my father is calling for me; duty calls."

"I don't mind anyway," she shrugged coolly, earning an eye roll from him.

Liven left her alone in the library. Austrella chose a comfortable chair near a large window, the natural light streaming in, and opened the book she had picked.

As time passed, Austrella walked out to the palace gardens, partially engrossed in the book. Soon she found herself drawn to the lush maze. She eventually reached the heart of the maze, where the fascinating stone fountain stood as the centerpiece.

She sat on down on the grass far from the fountain, immersed in the book, momentarily forgetting her worries. Until Liven's voice called her name from the depths of the maze.

"Ella? Ella, are you there?"

A smile quirked her lips up and she pretended not to hear him; she disliked being interrupted. When he didn't call her again, she thought pleasantly that he must've left.

"Ella."

Startled, Austrella turned around to see Liven approaching from behind, his ocean eyes locking onto hers. *So he didn't leave.* She tried not to groan in frustration. She turned back to the book.

"I was looking everywhere for you. I even thought you tried to escape." Liven sounded more amused than worried.

"I wouldn't be so forgiving if you interrupted me," Austrella muttered.

"Spoken like a true bookworm," he rehashed her words as he sat beside her on the ground.

She closed her book with a huff and turned to him with sharpness in her eyes. "Can you not leave me alone for at least a minute?"

His lips pulled up to a smile. "Actually, I left you alone for nearly three hours. I suggest you check your clock; it might be damaged."

Austrella struggled to hold back a smile, her earlier annoyance fading into the air. "No, I think your clock is ticking faster with determination to send you off to bed. So, you would finally leave me alone to myself."

Liven laughed with a glint in his eyes. "You are the best choice I've made," he confessed, a smirk tugging his lips.

Austrella withheld her retort and rolled her eyes instead, averting them from his.

"So, tell me honestly, how exactly did you find your way here?"

"I told you, I'm a maze expert," she replied almost hastily, suddenly tense. "Like you said you are."

"It was only an excuse not to reveal myself to you then. But yes, I am an expert now because I've been coming and going for years now. It took me years to memorize the way in and out. And I highly doubt if such a thing as a *maze expert* exists."

Austrella let out a groan finally. She had thought she escaped this conversation last night. "Don't you have anything else to say? Or, I'd really appreciate it if you could just leave me alone." She returned to her book.

"You know, you need to be careful not to read anything out loud. If you do, the maze will work its enchantment on you and will trap you here," Liven warned.

Austrella shot him a sidelong glance. With a challenging gleam in her eye, she asked, "Really? Then let me..." She turned to the book, ready to play his game.

Before she could even utter a word, he snatched the book from her hands, panic in his eyes. "Whoa, whoa, no! No, you cannot do that. You will get trapped in the maze alone forever."

He looked serious.

"Getting trapped in a maze is better than getting trapped with you," she retorted.

A smirk crossed his face, his serious mask crumbling. "I know you're lying."

Austrella rolled her eyes, exasperated, before snatching back her book. "Can you please stop talking for a minute? I'm trying to read, and you... you are... ugh! So distracting!"

He placed his thumb under her chin, tilting her face to his. She stiffened at the touch, a strange feeling coursing through her body.

"Distracting? *Charmingly* distracting?"

Oh yes, he was. Austrella pushed away the strange feeling and turned away from him with a glare, groaning aloud. "Can you just leave? I need peace! Oh Creator, *where* can I find peace?" Though annoyed, she secretly enjoyed his company. And that was odd enough.

"Oh, I know. In Heaven," Liven muttered amusedly.

Austrella rolled her eyes again. "Oh, I just want to be there, so I'll be completely free of you," she shot back, determined to annoy him.

"Ah, don't worry, my love," Liven didn't resist to tease her further. "I get that you're worried thinking you would lose me first when we get old. But I will ask the Creator to take us together."

Heat covered her cheeks. Her widened eyes turned to him, narrowing them to a glare, but it failed to remain still at his smirking gorgeous face. She averted her gaze, groaning again. "Don't you have anything else to talk about?"

"Alright then, how old are you?"

His question took her by surprise and Austrella couldn't help but laugh out loud, turning to him in utter amusement. He looked both confused and amused by her unexpected reaction.

"You—chose—me—without... without even knowing my *age*!" She clenched to her stomach as she laughed. "You are the stupidest man I've ever met!"

A genuine smile broke onto his face. "I didn't get a chance to ask you many things I wanted to. You know last night was quite busy choosing and chasing

you.”

Austrella rolled her eyes at the mention of *choosing and chasing*. “You could’ve asked me first thing in the morning,” she remarked. “Or at the breakfast, or during the tour.”

“Well, I’m asking now, aren’t I?”

“Fine,” she muttered. “I’m only... only sixteen, you know. *Sixteen!* Not exactly the age to get married.”

Liven blinked in astonishment, his eyes widening. “What?” His shock disappeared as soon as it surfaced. “Sixteen? Seriously?”

Austrella tilted her head, hardly managing to pretend not to be amused. “Yes, seriously. Why would I lie about my own age?”

“Princess, you’re not sixteen.”

“And how do *you* know that?”

A knowing glint sparkled in his eyes as he leaned closer to her. “Because I see you, Ella, I’m looking at you now. You’re older than sixteen for sure. Moreover, I know you’re lying. You’re not that talented in pretending.” He winked and her jaw dropped slightly. “Now, tell me your real age.”

Her pretense crumbled under his unwavering gaze, and her face betrayed a smile. “Nineteen.”

Liven laughed, looking satisfied. “There, I knew it. And for the record, I wouldn’t have chosen you any differently even if you were younger.”

Austrella couldn’t help but blush at his words. “So, *Prince* Liven, how old are you?” She turned the tables on Liven.

“I’m only nineteen,” he said with a shrug but his eyes betrayed a mischievous glint.

Austrella rolled her eyes. “Using my own trick against me now, are you?”

“No, of course not. I’m nineteen actually.”

“You look older than that. You are older than that for *sure*.”

Liven raised a gracious eyebrow. “Really? How much older do I look, then?”

Austrella pretended to contemplate it for a moment before a sly grin spread across her face. “Thirty something?”

His eyes widened in exaggerated surprise. “What? *Thirty?*” He laughed heartily. “You must know your betrothed isn’t an old man.”

Austrella joined his laughter. "Alright, alright, I was only kidding. You look like... mid-twenties, maybe?"

Liven's smile widened at her answer. "Twenty-five, to be precise."

Her lips curled up in a smile.

She didn't want to laugh with him, or even enjoy the moment, but she found herself enjoying their conversation more than reading a book.

Was he the actual dark prince? Or was this kindness a façade? Her mind battled between the two questions.

But he did kill her brother, didn't he? She tried not to forget that, even though another thought said that he might have changed—he did mention a bitter past.

However, she mustn't fall for his words, charm, and kindness. She couldn't tell between what was right and wrong.

"Oh, there's something I need to forewarn you." Liven snapped her back to reality, and she whipped her head to see him. "Please, for heaven's sake, try not to call me the stupidest man you've ever met in front of the king. He wouldn't take it as easily as I do."

Austrella would never dare to do that anyway. That man was frightening. "I won't."

"You can call me anything you want when we are alone, but not in front of him, alright?"

Austrella nodded slightly before tilting her head. "Really? Can I call you *anything* I want?"

His eyes scrutinized her, his answer following gradually. "Yes. And you sound *so* pleased about it."

"Of course, I am pleased, Your Royal *Lowness*." Austrella smirked at his surprised face. "Now tell me, what is the name of the king?"

Liven blinked. "You don't know?"

"No. I didn't know your name either until it was announced. I didn't hear anyone addressing the king with his name... so I don't."

"Father's name is Leopold."

Austrella feigned confusion and blinked. "Leopard?"

"Leopold, Princess." He laughed, shaking his head. "Try not to mispronounce his name before him. He doesn't like it."

“I won’t, Your Royal Annoyance.” She laughed with him.

Time ticked away. When it was time for lunch, Austrella hesitated. She didn’t want to face the king again. When she confessed it to Liven, his response was unexpected but thoughtful. He suggested having their lunch in the garden and she couldn’t hold back her smile or whispering a *thank you*.

Though, Austrella knew she couldn’t escape the king forever; she would see him at the dinner. However, at dinner, astonishingly enough, the king behaved as if she didn’t exist. He didn’t pay the slightest attention to her presence. While she braced herself for another confrontation, the king left her in silence.

After dinner, when she was going to her room, Liven came asking if she would like to join him in stargazing. She hadn’t stargazed in ten years, so she agreed without a second thought.

Liven led her to the top of the tallest tower in the palace. The moment they reached there, Austrella was captivated. The tower was wide and open; it was a serene haven, with its stone railing encircling the platform and a spiraling stone staircase leading down. It offered breathtaking views of the palace grounds and the surrounding kingdom, bathed in the soft lights. It also offered an open view of the sky that stretched out endlessly.

Austrella had never seen the stars quite this way. From the palace grounds or even her balcony, they appeared distant, mere pinpricks in the dark space. But here, from this elevated point, the stars seemed astonishingly close. The night was clear. They filled the sky like a shimmering sea of stars.

Liven spread out a thick, comfortable blanket he’d carried along on the stone floor, in the center of the space.

“What’s... what’s that for?” Austrella’s heart danced with a mix of emotions—the beauty of the night sky, the gentle breeze, and the unsettling realization that she was sharing this moment with the dark prince who had upended her life...

Liven shot her a smile before reclining on the blanket and looked up at her with a smirk. “The best way to stargaze,” he said. “Come on.” He patted the blanket beside him.

Her pulse quickened.

Lie down with him?

He has to be joking!

But she couldn't bring herself to say *no*. She hesitated for a moment, eyes locked on him. Then slowly, she nodded and joined him on the blanket, keeping a good distance. But the drumming of her heart didn't cease.

She turned and fixed her gaze upward on the sky, watching the stars in wonder. She'd seen countless stars, but not as many as this. Awe captivated her senses.

Liven broke the silence with a soft question. "Have you ever stargazed before?" His voice was mesmerizing.

Austrella's gaze remained fixed on the stars as she replied, "It's been a long time." Living in the woods never gave her the privilege even to see the *sky* properly. A faint smile of wonder touched her lips as she mused, "It's almost overwhelming, isn't it? How beautifully the Creator has made them. It never ceases to amaze me. The sky, the stars, the moon and... everything..."

"Including us," Liven added.

Heat crawled to her cheeks as she mumbled, repeating, "Including us." She sighed dreamily. "I could stay here forever."

"Me too. But since winter is near, it's so cold out here. Are you cold? Do you want my coat?"

"No, I'm fine. Cold doesn't bother me much. The place where I used to live was always cold and I got used to it." Living in the woods had made her forget what summer was like. Even in summer, it was still cold in the woods. She shuddered at the thought. She was thankful to no longer be there.

"Is that why you're more like... pale? Beautifully pale, I mean."

Austrella rolled her eyes, blushing. "Yes."

Silence weaved between them for a moment before Liven broke it again, telling her stories of what he thought of the stars when he was little, about how they stayed up in the sky.

Austrella felt comfortable with Liven and laughed with him, but she couldn't completely let her guard down. However, the tension between them remained intense.

Even though her eyes were mostly fixed on the stars, now and then, she felt the weight of Liven's gaze on her. She dared not to look back at him when he watched her, but at moments when he wasn't, she couldn't resist stealing glances at his handsome face.

He was undoubtedly, breathtakingly more beautiful than the stars in the night sky. She found herself captivated by his features, his ocean-blue eyes, his strong jawline, and the way the moonlight illuminate his face. Her strange feelings grew stronger with each stolen glance, and she had to tear her gaze away forcibly, reminding herself of her grudge against him.

The gentle night breeze whispered like a lullaby, its coolness getting chilly by the minute. The breeze cradled her into drowsiness. She yawned softly, her eyelids growing heavier with each passing moment.

"It seems the stars have worked their magic on you, my love." Liven's voice drew her eyes to him and she caught his smile.

She narrowed her eyes, unable to resist a smile. "And what is that supposed to mean?"

"You're sleepy. I think you should go to bed."

"I can stay up a little longer," she said, her words slurred with drowsiness. "I'll go when you do. I'd like to stay longer."

"Are you certain?"

"Positive."

But the weight of her fatigue overcame her, and her eyelids grew heavier. She sighed, and her eyes closed.

CHAPTER 9 | REBELLIOUS

All eyes turned to her like magnets when Austrella strolled into the kitchen. The royal kitchen was ten times vaster than her uncle's was and the number of workers was higher as well. The savory aroma of freshly prepared dishes enveloped her along with the heat.

Everyone smiled and greeted her with surprise and respect, and she returned it. The atmosphere shifted abruptly when Liven entered behind her. The room went still as everyone paused their tasks. Light gasps filled the air, and everyone looked utterly shocked.

A tall man with a white hat, who seemed to be the head chef, quickly removed his headgear and bowed deeply. "Your Highness, welcome to our humble kitchen." His voice carried the shock the entire kitchen had fallen into.

The others in the kitchen followed suit, bowing respectfully. Many gaped at the prince as if they were seeing a ghost. The kitchen might be Liven's rarely visited place, Austrella thought.

"Thank you for your welcome. Please, continue your work." Liven walked with Austrella into the kitchen, hands stuffed in his pockets. "We just came to look around. My bride is fortunately fond of the kitchen."

"What?" Austrella stifled a laugh before she threw him a glare and smiled sweetly at the workers. "I just came here to say the food was really delicious."

The head chef, still somewhat in awe, stammered, "We are so honored to hear that, milady."

"If you need any help, His Highness and I are here to offer a hand," she said, smiling smugly as Liven's wide eyes turned to her. She smiled even smugger, knowing he didn't know the first thing about cooking.

The chef's eyes widened in surprise. "Oh, I must thank you for your kind heart, milady, but not to worry; we have everything coming along just perfectly."

"Please, do not bother yourself with our visit, you can continue your work," Liven said to the stunned workers who had their eyes stuck on him.

The kitchen returned slowly to its lively atmosphere as people returned to work, but they kept peeking at Liven and his bride.

Austrella's eyes fell upon her lady's maid, Maggie, at the doorway of the kitchen, leaning against the doorframe as she watched. Maggie was a young woman in her late thirties and she had been kind to Austrella since the first moment. Austrella liked her already.

She walked to Maggie, and when Maggie caught sight of her approaching, a smile graced her lips. "What a beautiful sight, milady. We would not have expected to see the prince coming down to us," she said. "This has never happened. His Highness has not visited the kitchen before."

"Never? Like not even once?" she asked, surprised.

Maggie nodded. "Never, milady. But things have changed, thanks to you."

Austrella blinked, perplexed. "Me?"

"Yes, he has been different since you came," the maid enlightened her with a pleasant smile.

Austrella blinked again, her lips parting, and she stole a glance at Liven who was conversing with the chefs. Everyone surrounded the prince, intently watching, listening, and talking with him.

"I-it... can't be—I mean, I just came here the day before yesterday."

"Yes, and His Highness has been different since then. We haven't failed to notice."

Austrella didn't *want* to believe it.

"And oh, milady, what my eyes witnessed yesterday has never left my mind." Maggie touched a hand to her chest with a dreamy look in her eyes.

Austrella arched an eyebrow. "What did you see?"

"You were asleep, milady, and His Highness carried you to your room."

Austrella gaped, realization hitting her. When she had woken up in her room earlier today, she remembered spending the last night stargazing with Liven and that she had fallen asleep. She didn't know how she ended up in bed, but the possibility wasn't oblivious to her. However, she was too shy to ask him and confirm it.

Maggie noticed her shock and asked, "You... you didn't know, milady?"

“No, I... I wasn’t sure... I don’t remember anything at all.”

“I must admit I was surprised to see it,” Maggie began and Austrella held her breath. “When I saw His Highness carrying you, I thought something happened to you and ran to His Highness, asking what happened. Then he shushed me, gently though, saying you were asleep. His Highness was carrying you so carefully—of course, he would, I don’t know why I was so surprised. But the way His Highness was looking at you whilst carrying... oh milady, I have never seen or thought he could be so gentle and caring.

“His Highness brought you to your room and tucked you in. And milady, he was smiling. We’ve seen His Highness mostly every day all these years, but to see him gentle and smiling... It is something we have never seen before. The darkness in him was not there at all, and his smile was quite genuine. He sat by your side, staring at you with that smile. Then he told me I could leave, and I left.”

The kitchen blurred around Austrella, her shock intense and emotions swirling like a tempest as Maggie’s words revealed a side of Liven she had never anticipated.

Her gaze darted towards him instinctively. Liven caught her gaze, their eyes locked, and he smiled at her. It was warm and genuine.

She composed herself and masked the shock with a strained smile. She couldn’t fathom what was happening to her. This wasn’t part of the plan, not in the least.

Maggie’s words echoed in her head for the rest of the day. To deceive herself by pretending unaffected by him, Austrella increased her retorts and glares towards him, only to earn his beautiful smile, melodic laugh, and the twinkles in his eyes in return.

Maggie seemed to be right. He didn’t seem like the dark prince, not like how she had thought, not like how the people said. Not like her uncle had warned. He was... *different*, and the difference seemed genuine.

On the next day, when Austrella was enjoying her time alone in the gardens, Liven joined her. To escape him, she climbed up a tree with belief that he didn’t know about climbing. Living in the woods for ten years, she was an expert.

But alas, he climbed after her. Though he failed at the first attempt, he tried and caught up with her in the next. He admitted to not having any experience

and said that the desperation to be up there with her won out.

Sitting in the tree, they talked for hours about their childhood—Austrella was careful with each word, but kept them as truthful as possible. They talked like friends. The connection between them strengthened, and she found herself drawn to him more. She didn't want to stop talking with him.

The next day, Austrella challenged him into archery. Archery was one of her talents; her father had taught her and brought her along for hunting with him countless times before. Liven was more than willing. His arrow hit the bull's eye and he smirked victoriously at her. She complimented his talent dramatically and teasingly before firing hers, which pierced into his arrow, tearing it apart.

She would never forget the look on his face.

He challenged her to spar next, and she accepted it gladly—her father had taught her that as well. However, Liven was so talented that he used a secret trick and defeated her in mere minutes. So fast that it stunned her.

Maybe, *just* maybe, this prince wasn't as insufferable as she initially thought.

Spending time with Liven was more wonderful than any other moment she spent on earth. Yet, several times, she told him she'd rather spend her day alone—a lie, that was. She continued with her retorts and rebellious acts, which finally earned her a nickname from him: *rebellious princess*.

Austrella's heart swelled at the name and she loved the way he called her. But she couldn't let those strange feelings take over her. Thus, she had to fight it back by being more rebellious towards him and ended up throwing her slipper at him when he revealed the nickname.

The next two days passed with a few hours of horseback riding, lunch in the heart of the maze, reading books together, talking while watching the sunset, playing chess and other royal games, and stargazing—all with him.

Every word, every smile, and his every glance held genuineness. His presence reminded her of what it was like to have a good friend.

Who was this man?

Wasn't he supposed to be the dark prince? The one who would talk to her harshly, yell at her whenever she retorted, or even hurt her. Why, most things that came from her mouth would have anger anyone... but not him.

He didn't anger.

Each time, Austrella drew closer to him, as well as he to her. She even found an hour without him strangely lonely. Her feelings grew wild, making her frantic about what was happening to her. Then she'd remind herself of his murderous acts, but a minute later, she'd forget it.

This repeated day after day, time after time. And Austrella grew fearful of her feelings.

What was she doing? Enjoying every day with him and getting to know him was never the plan.

She had vowed to herself the moment he brought her to the palace that she would escape and return to her parents. Yet, here she was, entangled in something she couldn't quite comprehend.

She grappled with the fear of losing herself to these inexplicable feelings. They were calling her into its depths, but she braced herself so hard not to give in.

Austrella realized that she needed to act swiftly. He was indeed doing something to her, but she couldn't believe that she was doing something to him as well. It terrified her. She needed to escape before whatever was between them pulled them closer and took control.

She needed to remember constantly about who Liven truly was—the dark prince who tore her life apart. The escape plan was her only lifeline, her only chance to prevent her heart from falling for him.

She must escape today.

Austrella curled up on a sofa near the tall glass window of the library. Her eyes flickered from her book to the sun often as it dipped below the horizon.

"What are you reading?" Liven's voice interrupted her solace. Her gaze snapped towards him and saw him approaching with a mug in his hand.

She averted her eyes to the book, muttering in an unpleasant tone, "Nothing that involves you."

Her briefly found solace in the pages was completely shattered when he perched on the sofa beside her. Austrella stiffened and cast him a narrowed look before returning to her book that she could no longer concentrate on.

"Is it interesting?" he asked.

She grunted slightly. "Yes, because you're not in it."

"Then I'm pretty sure it's boring you. That's why I'm here."

"Leave me alone, Liven."

"Yet, you secretly love my company."

"Liven!" Austrella hissed, glaring at him because he had in fact read her mind. "Speak one more word and I will hit you with this book."

"I'd love to see you try, rebellious princess." Liven smirked, amusement evident in his eyes. Her lips ached to smile, and she immediately turned away. "Can I ask you something?"

"No."

"Do you know what's *the* most powerful thing?"

Austrella turned to him and feigned pure annoyance. "What I know as *the* most powerful now is hate." She returned to her book with a scowl.

"The question is no joke, Ella."

Austrella closed her book with a sharp sigh, laying it aside. "We need to talk." Her eyes met his with seriousness.

Liven lifted an eyebrow. "What's it?"

She looked away, hesitating for a moment before standing up and facing him. "I've been thinking... what your father said days ago... I think he's right. I mean, he *is* absolutely right. I'm only a servant. I can't be your bride. I can't be the princess."

Liven sighed, weariness taking over his features. "He is absolutely wrong. So are you. We've already talked about—"

"No," she interjected. "We... we need to talk about this. Seriously."

"I told you, Ella, I will not change my mind."

"I can't be the princess or the queen. I am only a servant. Your father is right," she insisted, her tone unwavering. "I don't deserve this. I actually *can't* do this! There are many other deserving women out there, *noblewomen*, one of them who will make a perfect bride, a princess, and a queen. Choose one of them. Choose someone else. I'm nothing but a mistake."

Liven's expression shifted to sheer frustration. "I *know* I haven't made a mistake. I know what I'm doing, Ella, and it's not a mistake. And you, you're not a servant anymore." His voice tinged with exasperation. "You are no longer bound by that title. You're the future princess of Catsimoor, *my* princess, my future queen. *Not* a servant."

Austrella shook her head, determined to make her point. “I can’t accept this... I mean, I don’t want this at all. There are better women out there who are dying for this opportunity, who’d make a perfect bride. But not me. I can’t be the princess—I don’t *want* to be. This future is not meant for me.”

“What is said is said,” Liven said, firmness growing in his voice. “There’s no turning back from what I’ve chosen.”

“You can! You’re the prince—”

“This is what I want, Ella. Once and for all, I’ve made my decision. You’re the one I want. No one else.”

Austrella’s eyes welled with frustration and unspoken emotions. She didn’t know how exactly to make him understand. To make him understand without telling him that she was scared of her feelings and wanted to escape. “But I don’t want this! You can’t force me into this. It’s not right. What if I can’t be the princess they want? What if I don’t meet their expectations?”

“I don’t care what people think.” Liven rose to his feet, frustration darkening his ocean eyes. “I don’t care what anyone thinks because this is *my* choice. *You* are my choice and no one can change it. And I know, I just know, you will make a great princess—”

“But I don’t want to be! Don’t you understand that? You’re forcing me against my choice, you’re making me sacrifice my freedom and my happiness! I’m not the one for you,” she argued.

“And how do you know that? Is there any proof?” he asked in a controlled voice. “Ella, you don’t have to make any sacrifice. I can give you the life you deserve—”

“What if I don’t want it?” she posed the questioning, her voice starting to waver with the intensity of the moment. She hated to act frustrated and angry, but she *had* to do this. She had to make him give up on her. “This is not what I want. None of this is. Because... because you know who you are and what you’ve done, and I can never be your bride.”

Liven’s frustration mirrored hers as he implored, “Give me a chance. Just a chance to show you who I truly am. I *was* once the man the people believed I am, but not anymore. So, give me a chance to prove to you who I am, that I’m not how you *think* I am.”

Austrella had no idea what was there to cry about, but tears gathered at the corner of her eyes and she failed to fight them back.

“You don’t... you don’t understand. Giving you a chance means I’m betraying my family and my people. And I won’t do that. I won’t let my family, my people, or even myself down. Giving you a chance will be the cruelest thing I do to my...” *my brother*. She swallowed the lump formed in her throat, more tears rushing to her eyes. “You’re a murderer.”

Liven’s eyes bore into hers with unwavering determination. He stepped close and grabbed her hands, holding them firmly in his. “I see what’s holding you back. My past is frightening you, I know, but Ella, I’ve changed. I’m only asking for a chance. To prove it to you. To show you who I am.”

Austrella shook her head frantically. Her heart yearned against her will to give him a chance. “I can’t! I can’t do this. I hate you for putting me in this position!” She turned away, pulling her hands from his and burying her face in them as her emotions threatened to overwhelm her.

“Ella,” Liven sighed her name. “Ella, I understand this is hard for you, but I will make everything easier for you if you let me. If you give me a chance. Just a chance. I don’t want to force you but I... I *want* you.”

“But I hate you,” she mumbled against her palms.

What a lie. A poisonous one just to get away from him.

Silence descended, providing her hope that he was reconsidering his choice. That he was about to give in.

Then, shockingly, his hands found hers and pulled them away from her face. She didn’t fight him and found him standing right in front of her. His fingers held her chin and lifted her gaze to meet his unreadable one.

Liven leaned forward. “Ella,” he whispered her name.

Austrella was supposed to shut him out in every way but she couldn’t bring herself to fight against his touches. She couldn’t move when his hands cradled her face, holding it as if it were a fragile treasure.

“Don’t do this to me. All I’m asking is for a chance. Please, just one chance, and I will show you who I am. I will show how much I want you.”

Austrella’s defenses began to crumble as she looked into his desperate ocean eyes. She couldn’t fathom what was occurring to her, but she knew the strange feelings were pulling her to him.

All she could do was stare at his face, breathe in his scent, and melt at his gentle touch that fluttered her heart. "Liven..."

Oh, how much she longed to give him a chance. But she couldn't let her family down.

"I won't back down, Ella, not until you agree. Please, just a chance."

The caresses on her face made her long to close her eyes and feel them forever. Though his proximity intensified the tension around them, it always exuded warmth and comfort.

Liven took one more step closer, his face leaning closer to hers. Austrella's heart thundered as her eyes were drawn to his lips. The memory of their first kiss flashed in her mind, making her want to feel his lips again. The temptation was almost irresistible, and she found herself leaning closer and quicker than he did, but when their lips were only a breath away, the realization hit her like a bolt.

She pulled away, horror flashing in her eyes. She couldn't believe what she was trying to do, what she longed for, and what was *actually* happening to her.

This was all wrong. If she stayed there longer, she might give in to the pull between them and could never leave again.

"Ella." Liven reached out for her desperately, but she backed away further before turning on her heels and running away. "Ella! Ella, wait!"

Austrella ran out of the library as fast as possible. When she made it to her room, she locked the door and threw herself onto the bed.

Oh Creator, what is wrong with me? I don't want him! I don't want to fall for him! I know he killed my brother, and I should not fall for him. Then why am I longing for him? Why do I feel like I'm falling for him and hate to leave him?

It was the very reason why she should escape as soon as possible, no matter what. She shouldn't have stayed this long, allowing them to draw close. She must save herself from the magnetic pull he had on her heart.

Time ticked away and night fell. Austrella sat by the window, staring out into the darkness, lost in her chaotic thoughts when she heard a soft, hesitant knock on her door.

She ignored it, hoping that whoever it was would give up and go away. The knock came again, slightly louder this time.

"Ella," Liven's voice called out from the other side. "Please, open the door. I know you're in there."

Austrella glanced at the door, longing to answer and let him in. The tears that had retreated now returned.

Liven's voice grew more desperate as he continued, "I understand that you're upset. I am too. But please, just open the door."

She held her silence, clenching her jaw to hold back her tears.

"Ella? Can you hear me? If you do, then please come out. It's time for dinner. You don't have to face the king. We can have a private dinner in the garden. You said you liked having meals in the garden, didn't you? I've arranged it for you now. Just come out."

"I will come out if you promise to let me go," she called back.

"Please open the door."

"Promise me first!"

"I won't let you go, I told you that already. I'm not going to change my mind. Now, open the door."

Frustration surged in her. Why should he be so stubborn to have her after she said that she hated him? Her heart swelled against her instincts, growing more longing. But she knew she shouldn't follow the desires of her heart.

"Then I won't change my mind either!"

"Open the door, Ella!" Liven knocked again, harshly this time.

"No!"

"At least for dinner."

"Only if you let me go!"

"You can't do this to me, Ella, I humbly asked for a chance! A simple chance!"

"Just go away, Liven!"

"I won't let you go, and that's final!" His voice grew loud and stern as his patience seemed to wear thin. "Open this door now."

Austrella stayed silent.

"If you won't open the door, Ella, I'll break it down." His voice was cold and furious, and he slammed harder on the door.

"Then do it!" she called back challengingly. Although, she *did* fear that he would break down the door and all her determination would waver seeing his face.

There was a brief silence, and then, startling her, she heard a loud, resounding thud against the door. It seemed to shake the frame, but the door

didn't break. It would take a thousand similar kicks to break it down anyway.

Austrella remained silent, her heart pounding, waiting to see what Liven would do next, wondering if he would use his powers and break them down. She had not asked him about his powers yet, remembering the horrible things it had done.

All that met her was silence. She waited and waited, but no knock, no voice followed.

She sighed helplessly. She wanted to drive him mad with her stubbornness and make him send her away, so she could go back to her uncle and live there. And since he wouldn't let her go, escape was the only option.

However, escaping meant she could no longer stay in Catsimoor, but go back to her parents in Westlock.

Several minutes later, another knock sounded on the door. When Austrella hesitated to answer, Maggie's voice called out saying she had brought dinner. Austrella was hungry, so she let her in.

Much to her relief, Liven didn't come again. It sparked hope in her that he might be reconsidering his choice.

Forging a plan to escape, Austrella lay on the bed, waiting for midnight to arrive. But she fell asleep and was awakened by the clock striking at twelve in the midnight.

Austrella was anxious about whether her plan would work or not, but it was worth a try. When she was about to climb down from the bed, her eyes fell upon a letter beside her with a red rose placed delicately across it.

She picked up the letter gingerly. Her hands shook. Without a doubt, she knew it was from Liven. Opening the letter, she confirmed it was. Anticipation and dread formed in her, and she read it.

My dear Ella,

I apologize if I frightened you or made you uncomfortable in any way. I didn't mean to. I understand it's because of who I was that you're trying to run away, but as I said before, please give me a chance and I'll show you I'm changed. All I'm asking is for a chance.

I want you to know this. I never put you under any enchantment, any spell, I swear. I would never do that. Whatever you feel is real. It is all real, Ella. And it's not

just you who feel it. I feel it too. And I'm holding onto it. I won't let you go, Ella, because I have never felt this way before.

Austrella felt like her heart might leap out of her chest. Her eyes welled up with tears.

She had expected only anger or frustration from him after their intense argument, but what she found instead made her feel torn in between; she wanted to stay but also run away.

Falling for her enemy was not part of the plan. It had never been. Now, she feared she was on the verge of falling, even though she refused to admit it to herself as she was frightened.

Deep down, she couldn't deny that Liven's words touched something within her. The bond formed between them felt stronger, a connection she tried to ignore, and now it frightened her.

She shook her head; she couldn't allow herself to be swayed by these emotions.

She needed to escape *now*.

Austrella wiped away her tears and folded the letter. She changed from her nightgown into a dark blue gown that would help her blend into the shadows. She slipped Liven's letter into her pocket and stepped out of her room.

The corridors of the castle were silent, with only the faint flicker of torches lighting her way. Her heart pounded loudly in her chest, and she took every step cautiously. She pretended to be at ease in case anyone saw her. She exited the wing in no time and walked through the corridors.

A guard crossed her path when she neared the exit, calling out, "Where are you going, milady?"

She composed herself and shot him a smile. "Just to the garden," she replied calmly. "I need some fresh air."

The guard nodded, convinced by her answer. Once out of the castle, she glanced around to ensure no one was following her, and then she set off towards the stables, pretending all the way that she was simply taking a stroll.

She had no clear destination in mind but she knew she had to leave the castle, and then she would decide if she should head to her uncle's or not. The night was clear, but it was colder than the last evening as the winter was approaching.

When she spotted the stables, she expected to feel happy to know that she had safely made it here. However, there was no sign of happiness. Only unwillingness to leave Catsimoor. No, not Catsimoor—Liven.

Her pace quickened as she hurried towards the stables, trying to map out a plan in her head. When she reached the stable doors, a voice from behind stopped her in her tracks, in heart-stopping shock.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

CHAPTER 10 | DESIRE

Austrella gasped and spun around.

Her eyes collided with Liven's intense ocean ones. He stood right behind her, only a few feet away.

She couldn't believe this. She had high expectations about this escape with the hope that everyone was asleep. Apparently, the dark prince wasn't.

"Liven? What... what are you doing here?"

Standing before her wasn't the amusing and teasing Liven. This was the stern Liven she'd first encountered. "Don't you think you have no right to ask such a thing when you were here in the first place?" His expression was deadly serious.

Austrella opened and closed her mouth repeatedly before she finally managed to speak. "I... I was just walking?" Disappointment and frustration surged in within her, but the anxiety of being under his calculating, deadly stare surpassed them.

"Or, were you trying to escape in the dead of the night, thinking no one would see you?" Of course, he wouldn't believe her stupid lie.

"I... couldn't sleep, s-so... I thought to... take a walk."

"Liar." He admonished her sternly. "Go ahead; admit why you're here."

Austrella sighed in defeat. "Fine. I was going to escape. Satisfied?"

"Did you really think you could get past the gates?"

Her mouth fell open.

The gate! How had she forgotten that? Her mind had been so occupied with the escape out of the castle that she didn't even remember the palace was surrounded by walls and an imposing iron gate.

When she didn't respond, Liven stepped forth, and she didn't miss the darkness ascending in his eyes. "What is wrong with you? I was doing my best to make your life here happier, to make you comfortable with me, and I made sure

you're enjoying every single minute... Yet here you are, trying to escape in the middle of the night as if you were held here as a captive!"

Her heart clenched. "You... you know why. You know why I don't want to be here."

"Oh, because of who I was, isn't it?" he asked curtly. "I asked for nothing but a simple chance and you can't even consider that? Did I ask too much of you? No, I made sure—"

"You *forced* me to stay here!"

His eyes narrowed. "Because I chose you. And you're supposed to be here since I did so. That's how it works."

"You chose me against my will."

Liven scoffed. "Against your will? Did you come to the ball against your will? The ball was held for *me* to find a bride, and you knew it, didn't you? Every maiden was invited for me to choose from, so you had to come prepared—not to reject me when I choose. That was what the ball was about. There's no room for you to refuse once you attended my ball."

Austrella knew he was speaking the truth. She wouldn't have attended if people hadn't strongly believed he wouldn't choose, but they did and she went.

Liven continued in a heated voice, "And, for heaven's sake, did I not tell you countless times that I did *not* kill the royal family?"

"I don't believe you," Austrella spat. "If they're not dead, then where are they? I heard that you killed the prince. If you haven't, then where is he?" she asked challengingly.

Liven glared at her with great intensity. No word came out.

His silence was her answer. He had killed Adam. Her anger flared, and her eyes began to moisten. "So that proves it. Your silence proves it. And now you know why I want to escape."

"Which is not going to work as long as I'm here," Liven spoke through gritted teeth. "Get back to your room, now," he commanded.

"Who are you—"

"I said, back to your room!" Liven's voice cut through the tension like a sharp blade. "No more words allowed."

Austrella hardly fought the urge to stamp her foot and groan. She would've put up a fight if she hadn't felt a tingle of fear at his authoritative tone. Realizing

that defying him could be risky, she grunted and walked past him to head back to her room. To her frustration, he caught up his pace with hers and walked with her until she reached her door.

She heard him muttering a goodnight when she closed the door in his face. Then she stamped her foot angrily. Leaning against the door, she sighed.

The weight of the disappointment of failing her ever so hoped mission to escape settled on her shoulders like a burden.

Austrella wondered how she would ever get past the palace gates. But she was determined not to give up. Her mission to escape was too important. She knew she had to keep trying until she succeeded, no matter the challenges she would face. Renewing her hope with determination, she went to bed.

The next day, Austrella woke up with another plan. She couldn't afford to let fear deter her. She would find a way past the gates.

With every thought of Liven, anger surged in her, until she met him at breakfast. When their eyes met, her fury dissipated into thin air. Their eyes locked for a long moment, her being the first to look away.

He didn't smile, and it unsettled her. She often glanced at him with worry. But he didn't return her glances, his eyes focused on his plate.

Was he hurt? She shouldn't care, but she did and she couldn't help it. His words, that he had been trying his best to make her comfortable, haunted her.

Had her escape attempt really hurt him?

She pushed her thoughts aside, reminding herself of his cruel act on her beloved brother—which she often forgot. All more reason to escape.

Austrella made her way to the music room right after breakfast; a place she remembered held the key to one of the secret passageways. Following her memory, she approached the grand piano.

Adam had played her a certain melody to open the secret passageway. It had been years since she last played a piano. Now standing before it, she remembered the tune so well, but the keys had almost faded from her memory.

Her fingers hesitated over the piano keys. After several attempts, she managed to get the right notes. As she played the melody, a section of the wall near the piano began to slide open with a faint, ominous creak, revealing the

secret passageway. She peered inside. It was a narrow, dark corridor. The sight of it sent a chill down her spine.

The passageway was shrouded in darkness as she'd expected, and she had come prepared. She retrieved a candle on its stand and a matchbox from her pocket, carefully lighting the candle. She stepped inside. The atmosphere was eerie, but she had no choice, this was her only way, so her determination led her forward.

The passageway was cold and foreboding. As she ventured forward, the wall behind her slid back and sealed her inside.

There was a secret passageway within this one, a very secretive one. She was heading for it, the one they used for escape ten years ago that had led them to the woods. Only her family knew about its existence. Therefore, she was sure neither Liven nor the king knew about the passageway to the woods, because it would only open with a secret phrase. That's how her mother had gotten them out then and she had assured Austrella that no one would find them as no one knew of the passageway.

Austrella knew the phrase; it was to be said while placing a hand on a particular wall. She reached a junction where several ways branched off in different directions. Following her memories and her father's words, she chose the rightmost way.

Her father had told her that, to find the certain wall, one should knock on the right-side wall and see if it sounded hollow. Therefore, as soon as she entered the passage, she used her empty hand to knock on the wall. After what felt like an eternity, she found the portion of the wall she was looking for.

She placed her palm on the wall and uttered the phrase. In response, it began to move with a grinding noise, pulling inward and revealing a hidden passageway beyond.

Austrella held her breath. She couldn't help her feelings of her awe and trepidation. The narrow corridor beckoned her forward, shrouded in darkness. Upon entering the hidden passage and descending a narrow staircase, she was met with a perplexing sight. Three different paths stretched out before her, branching off in different directions.

Her memory failed to recall which path led out of the castle, the one they'd used years ago. She spent a minute there, looking around as she debated her

choice. Finally, she decided to explore all three paths one by one until she found the one she needed.

Austrella walked along the right path, the stonewalls closing in around her, forcing her to bend slightly like she remembered her mother doing. A sense of familiarity fell over her as she ventured forth. As the path turned steeping down, her assumption was confirmed by resurfacing memories; this was the right path.

This path had taken them directly into the woods near the castle, through a trapdoor on the woods' ground—from the tunnel, the door was on the ceiling. No one could open that door without the secret phrase either; it had been covered by bushes the last time that she saw it.

She would escape at night; she was only making sure she knew the way. Escaping at night would give her plenty of time to get far away before her disappearance was noticed.

Happy that she had found the way, Austrella retraced her steps, heading back the way she had come. Out of curiosity, since she didn't know where the other two paths led, she decided to explore them.

The middle passage came to an abrupt end with a wooden door at its conclusion. Questions spun around in her mind, the first one being if the room contained secret treasures. It prompted her forward and she pushed the heavy wooden door open.

What she saw inside left her utterly shocked. The room felt like a chilling chamber of secrets, bathed in an eerie green and purple light. Shelves surrounded the room, lined with various objects; some seeming like glass bottles while others were unrecognizable.

The room held a dark aura.

Austrella walked in, looking around in wonder until her eyes landed upon a dark figure in a corner of the room. It seemed like a man, with his back towards her. He seemed engrossed in something that radiated an unsettling glow.

She held her breath. Who could this person be? No one other than her family knew this passage, so how did this person—whoever he was—came to be here?

Suddenly, the man turned around to grab something from a table nearby. Her curiosity quickly gave way to terror. He wore a dark hooded robe, his eerie face completely unfamiliar, and he appeared to be in his late forties.

She stepped back, hoping to escape before he saw her. Unfortunately, luck wasn't on her side. The man's gaze abruptly turned in her direction and their eyes met.

His eyes widened.

Panicked, Austrella took another step back towards the door.

"What are you doing here?" The man's voice was cold as ice but also alert, his expression turning from shock into harshness. Stopping whatever he was doing, he advanced towards her. "How did you get here?"

Fear paralyzed her. She tried to speak but was unable to form a response. In a desperate bid to escape, she turned back to run through the door. However, her escape was immediately thwarted as the door slammed shut automatically. Or magically.

Austrella tried to pull open the door, but it didn't budge. Her eyes snapped back to the man's unsettling gaze and saw his hand raised in the air. Was he a wizard?

"Who... who are you?"

"How did you get here?" His words were sharp like a blade. He slowed his pace towards her. His malevolent eyes pierced hers, making her shudder.

The air was thick with a dark aura and her own fear. Sweat beads formed on her forehead. "I-I... I don't know—"

"*How* did you get here?" he bellowed, making her jump. "No one is supposed to find this place! And how did *you* find it?"

Austrella held the doorknob and shook her head, struggling to breathe. "I-I... I just... it-it was... it was open... and I..." She tried to turn the doorknob again, but it didn't work.

"Open? It could never have been left open!" The suspicion in his voice was dangerous. "You, you are not supposed to be here—no one is!" He advanced, making her step backward in panic. He reached out swiftly, grabbing her by her throat and forcefully pinning her against the wall. The candle fell from her hand.

A strangled cry escaped her lips. She couldn't breathe. She had experienced fear before, but not like this. Her hands clawed at his, trying to pry it off her, but he was stronger; she was no match for his strength.

"Look at me," he barked. "Whatever you saw here, you shall not tell anyone. Breathe a word about this and I shall kill—which will hurt most? You or the

prince? Maybe both. Yes, I will kill you and your prince if you breathe a word to a soul. Is that clear?"

She could do nothing but gasp for breath. Tears crammed in her eyes, blurring her vision, unable to view the face of the deadly man.

"Is that clear?" he shouted, squeezing her throat so tight that she thought she would die.

She hardly managed to nod. He released her and backed away as she fell on her knees, reaching for her throat and coughing. Suddenly, the door flung open, making her eyes snap to the man to find him with his hand in the air again.

He was indeed a wizard.

Austrella struggled to get back on her trembling feet. She had no strength, yet she stood up. She wasted no time. She sprinted out of the room, head pounding. The light from the room lit her way as she ran out. Then she heard the door slamming shut.

Austrella had lost her candle. The passage was enveloped in darkness and she could not see anything.

She panted, her heart thundered, and her legs trembled. She wondered how she could get out without any light. Tears spilled from her eyes as fear consumed her. But she needed to get back before the mysterious man came and did something to her again.

Her hand traced the wall as she retraced her steps, moving blindly through the pitch-dark corridor towards the door to get out. She climbed up stairs. She didn't know if she was going the right way until she bumped into the wall. Placing her sweaty palm on the ball, she spoke the phrase and stepped back. She heard the eerie sound of the wall moving, and once silence fell, she stepped out of the hidden passage.

Austrella kept moving forward in the dark, picturing the way back in her head. She couldn't stop her tears or shuddering from the near-death experience. Fear consumed her as minutes passed and she was still walking in the dark.

Was she stuck here forever?

"Liven!" she cried desperately, her voice wobbling. She wanted him desperately; she wanted to be with him and to be consumed by his presence. It always brought her comfort. She had never felt so desperate for anyone before.

"Liven!" Her cries grew louder, echoing through the ominous passage.

She could barely keep up her pace now. Fear had taken away her strength. She had never been so alone in the dark, feeling lost. Powerless, she collapsed to the ground, hugging her knees to her chest. She knew she had to move on until she found a way out, but she was drowned in fear.

Then, not long before, she caught a dim light at the end of the way. It prompted her to her feet and took her towards it. She prayed it was a servant or guard since they used the passage too.

As if an answer to her prayers, she nearly collided with a passing maid clutching a candle. Both she and the maid gasped.

“M-milady? What are you—”

Austrella’s relief was palpable. “Liven—take me to Liven! I need to see Liven! Take me to him!” All she could think of was him, the only one she felt safe and secure around. She hadn’t realized it until now.

The startled maid tried to calm her down, asking her what was wrong and why she was crying. But Austrella couldn’t answer her, instead, she kept begging her to take her to Liven. The maid agreed and led her out of the passage, holding her hand as she needed support.

They came out through the library’s passage.

The kind maid led Austrella to Liven’s study. She paused to knock. But Austrella, in desperation, pushed the door open. Relief rushed through her veins when her eyes caught Liven, seated at his desk, engrossed in some royal matters. His eyes meet hers in shock at her intrusion.

“Ella?” He blinked, seemingly baffled at her tearful face.

Austrella, oblivious to anything but her urgent need for his presence, rushed towards him. Liven stood and moved around the desk towards her in bewilderment. As she reached him, she threw herself into his arms. Her desperation for him shocked her as much as him, but she needed it.

She needed him despite everything.

Liven froze, and then his arms encircled her. “What—what happened?” he asked, his arms around her equally as tight as hers around him.

Austrella didn’t speak. Instead, she buried her face in his chest, clinging to him as if he were her anchor in the storm. In his arms, she felt a rush of emotions—unexplainable relief, comfort, and an overwhelming sense of safety.

“Ella? Ella, what happened? You’re shivering!” His voice laced with fright and worry, holding her tighter.

“I found Her Ladyship in the secret passageway, Your Highness. She looked scared and was crying, but I do not know what happened or where Her Ladyship went. All she said was that she wanted to see you, Your Highness,” the maid explained.

“In the secret passageway?” he repeated, baffled, before asking Austrella, “Ella, what happened? Tell me, what happened? What were you doing in there?”

As the door closed with a click, signaling the maid’s leave, Austrella tried to speak. But her words barely made out. “I-I... there... there was...”

“Tell me,” he encouraged softly, his hand stroking her hair in a motion to calm her.

“There was... a-a... man a-and he... he choked me.”

“Choked you? Choked *you*? Who is he? Who dared to hurt you?” The disbelief in his voice shifted to anger.

“I-I don’t know... b-but he was—”

“Where is he? Where did you see him? I’ll send out the guards now.”

“I... I...” Austrella shuddered as she remembered the threat. She couldn’t bring herself to spit it out.

“Tell me,” he softened his voice, prompting her to continue but she didn’t. “Ella, tell me, tell me where he was.”

Austrella refused.

Liven seemed to sense her distress and didn’t press her further. Instead, he held her, his strong arms providing both physical and emotional support. Her shudder of fear melted away as his fingers continued to stroke her hair with tenderness. The coldness dissipated as his strong presence, the warmth of his embrace, and the scent of his cologne, all washed over her.

Nowhere had she felt safer than in his arms.

Liven summoned the guards in a fit of anger and ordered them to check all the passageways. Austrella wondered if he knew about the hidden passage *within* the passage. She couldn’t ask, otherwise she would be questioned in return how *she* knew it.

As he held her, time seemed to slow, her worries were forgotten, and she was no longer in the grip of fear. All that mattered was that Liven was with her and

she was safe.

“Ella,” he spoke a moment later. “What did he say to you? Don’t be afraid, you can tell me.”

“I can’t... I can’t say. He... he told me not to. He said if I tell anyone... he will... he will kill us both.”

Liven was silent for a moment. “Who is he? Do you know where you saw him? What did he look like?”

“I-I have never seen him before. I can’t tell you anything more... if I do... if I do...”

“Shhh, it’s okay.” Liven placed his chin atop her head. “I’ve sent the guards to find him. We will find him. But did he truly dare to hurt and threaten you?” His voice grew dark. “He must have a death wish.”

The gravity of the situation left her in the safety of Liven’s arms, and she found herself enveloped in a cocoon of caring. Liven pressed a kiss to her hair and her heart skipped a beat. This memory would never fade, she was certain; it would be etched in her heart forever.

Nestled against his chest, Austrella felt the frantic beat of his heart matching hers. She could stay forever in his arms, listening to his heartbeat and enveloped in his warmth.

Liven led her to a sofa and she sat on it. Only then did she notice the rain tapping on the glass window. He sat down beside her, recollecting her in his arms, surprising her even more.

She didn’t hesitate. The depth of his affection, something she never thought the dark prince was capable of, struck her.

The moment was interrupted when the door flung open and the king marched in. “What is going on here?” he asked, sounding both confused and harsh.

Austrella pulled away from Liven’s arms, tensed at the king’s presence. But Liven recollected her as if he wished not to depart from her. It took her by surprise—again. Thank the Creator; the king didn’t look displeased to see the *servant* girl in his son’s arms.

“Ella was attacked by an unnamed man in one of the secret passageways, who choked and threatened her not to tell anyone of what she saw.”

“What? Who dared to hurt the future princess?” King Leopold’s incredulous question caught Austrella by surprise.

Had he accepted her as the future princess? Not that she wanted to be, *but...*

“The guards are searching for him. Unfortunately, Ella is not allowed to reveal the location as the man threatened to take both our lives if she does.”

“What a wicked man! How dare he say such a thing?” The king growled. “I wonder who he is. A man with unbelievable guts, I suppose. Anyway, Son, we have a meeting in ten minutes. Better be there.”

“Tell the court I’m unable to make it today. I can’t leave her side now.”

Surprised once again, Austrella pulled away and met his eyes in protest. “Y-you don’t have to—I mean, you should go—”

Liven hooked a finger under her chin, making her stiffen. “The meeting is not important. But you are. I can’t leave you now.”

The king cleared his throat, capturing their attention. “Of course, you must stay with her. I’m certain the court would understand.”

Even Liven was surprised at this sudden change from his father. “Thank you.”

After the king left, Liven tried asking her to tell him everything, but she admonished him, telling him that their lives would be in danger if she did.

Just as Austrella expected, the guards weren’t able to find the man. They reported that they had searched everywhere but there was no sign of him. Liven was so furious that he decided to go and search by himself, but Austrella objected, and thankfully he had to listen to her.

As the night fell, it was shrouded in darkness and heavy rainfall. Austrella stayed close to Liven throughout the evening. Her attachment to him grew with every passing moment. Only when she left his side to go into her room did she realize how much her heart was attached to him.

She had needed his presence after such a dreadful situation, but she couldn’t believe she had hugged him and stayed in his embrace for such a long time. She felt a tingle of terror realizing that Liven was making his way into her heart despite her trying to block him out.

He was, from the start, a danger to her heart. What happened today made her heart want him desperately, but her instincts screamed at her to remember the decision she had made in the morning.

And she did.

She had vowed to herself that she would try to escape again tonight. She had firmly decided not to betray her family by staying and becoming his bride.

Austrella hated to hurt Liven with her escape, but family mattered most; she would never hurt them or her people. Liven was kind to her, he became her refuge today, and being in his arms made her feel like... she belonged there.

But that didn't change the fact he had killed her brother.

It was her feelings that terrified her now and made her want to escape. An escape from her feelings, rather.

She had to try to escape tonight. Not through the secret passageway, it was dangerous—because of that man.

She had another idea.

An hour passed since the clock struck midnight. Heart pounding fast, Austrella ignored her heart's desires and slipped out of her room. She made her way through the quiet corridors. She used her knowledge of the palace's layout to avoid the guards and servants. It was still raining, not heavily though, but her determination overrode any concerns about getting wet.

Austrella headed for the way out through the kitchen. She believed escaping during the rain would be a great chance; Liven would not expect her to attempt so in such weather.

Drawing in a deep breath, she walked into the rain. She shuddered and hoped she could outsmart the guards and make her escape.

Making her way to the palace's imposing gates, soaked by the downpour, she approached the guards on duty.

"Milady, what are you doing here in the rain?" A guard stepped forth.

"Please open the gates for me! I-I received an important letter from my father and I need to head back now! My mama... she's ill and dying! I have the cure for her and if I don't bring it now, she'll die! So, please let me pass through."

The guards looked at each other, bewildered by her story. "My lady, we cannot let you pass without His Highness' permission—"

"My mama is dying!" Austrella shouted. "If you won't let me pass, then her death will be your fault! So, let me pass through. I'll go and come back with my horse, so please open it!"

Not waiting for their response, Austrella spun around determinedly, only to freeze in her spot. Her eyes caught a familiar figure emerging through the rain.

Liven.

Not again!

Here she was thinking she had almost succeeded in her plan—*again*.

Liven approached her, his ocean eyes piercing through the rain. “Trying to escape again, are you?”

Her hope shattered, but she wasn’t as disappointed as last time. Instead, she was torn in between.

“Liven...” His name was a plea on her lips.

Liven averted his eyes, his gaze turning sterner as he glanced at the guards. “Don’t ever let her out unless I give you permission.”

His strong grip closed around her wrist and he pulled her away from the guards.

Austrella didn’t resist, she gave in and moved with him. Once they were out of earshot from the guards, she began. “Liven, I—”

“What are you doing, Ella?” Liven turned around on her, hurt flashing in his eyes and echoing in his voice. “Am I so bad that you keep running away? What did I do to you? Did I hurt you? Did I scare you? One moment you’re acting close, the next you’re running away. I don’t understand you, Ella, not at all!” he admitted, his voice unwavering but not stern. “You stayed in my arms till night and now you’re trying to run away from me? What are you trying to do? Stealing my heart so you could destroy it?”

Tears flooded down her eyes, mingling with the rain. His words went through her heart like a knife. At that moment, she hated herself for hurting him. It hurt her, too.

“Liven...”

The rain poured down heavily, drenching them to the bone as they stood face to face.

Liven was desperate for her answer. Raindrops clung to his dark hair, causing it to cascade gracefully onto his forehead. His white shirt clung to his well-built frame, accentuating the contours of his chest and the strength beneath. In the light from the castle and of rain-soaked night, he appeared almost ethereal with his ocean eyes intense and his wet skin glistening mesmerizingly.

She couldn’t take her eyes off him.

“Liven, I... I never wanted to hurt you,” Austrella began. “I don’t want to. I want to consider what you said and I wanted to give you a chance! I want to stay here! But I can’t... I *can’t* stay here with you and give you a chance. Because it will hurt me, my family, a-and... my people. So, I’m sorry if I hurt you, I truly am, but I cannot help it! I can’t do anything, because if I choose to give you a chance, then I’m failing my family, and I can’t do that. So I’m choosing to escape even though my heart wants to stay.” The words tumbled out as if she’d been holding them back for a long time.

Liven’s face softened. He stepped closer, leaning in to her, and touched her face. “Follow your heart, Ella. Follow the desires of your heart. Don’t shut it out.”

Austrella shook her head helplessly. “I-I can’t... Liven, I can’t. It terrifies me because what my heart wants is...” She trailed off, registering she had half-confessed the truth.

He cradled her face. “What is it? What does your heart want?” He grew more desperate. “Ella, tell me.”

Austrella loved the way he called her name, more lovingly than anyone else had. “I-it’s... it’s terrifying. It terrifies me.”

“What terrifies you?” he asked, searching in her eyes. “Does this terrify you?” He caressed her cheekbones.

Her heart thundered powerfully against her chest. “Liven...” she uttered breathlessly.

Liven stroked her hair before continuing to caress her face. “Does it terrify you, Ella?” he repeated.

“Liven—”

He crashed his lips down to hers and kissed her, silencing her. Her heart skipped a beat. Her surprise gave way to a surge of emotions that consumed her. His lips were warm and soft against hers, just like she remembered and had dreamed about.

Austrella returned the kiss, as she could no longer hold herself back. He kissed her passionately, a kiss that seemed to calm the storm within them, a kiss that empowered the pull between them, making them draw closer until no gap was left between.

Liven pulled away slowly, and she wished the moment didn’t have to end. Her eyes fluttered open to see him looking at her, before he leaned his forehead

against hers, touching her face delicately.

His eyes searched hers for answers and she answered breathlessly, "Yes."

He captured her lips in another ardent kiss that shook her to her core. This time, there was no resistance; she kissed him back with equal fervor. His mouth moved against hers hungrily, and she was burning with the same hunger.

The rain poured down on them as their bodies pressed against each other with no gap. Time ceased to exist. The world seemed to fade away. It was only the two of them, kissing in the rain with no intention of pulling away.

Austrella's heart was set on fire. She felt her entire body in flames, and not even the rain could put it out. Her hands found their way to his wet shirt, fingers curling around the fabric. She trembled with pleasure as he deepened the kiss. Liven eventually wrapped his strong arms around her, like a silent promise not to let her go no matter what.

Her path was alerted, she was bringing more danger to her heart, but at that moment, she didn't care about anything else.

All she knew was that her heart wanted him.

CHAPTER 11 | ECLIPSE

Liven held her to his side as he led them through a door that led them straight into the kitchen, water dripping down off the both of them.

The kitchen was deserted and silent, and their steps echoed in the quiet, dim room. A single candle provided dim illumination in the wide kitchen.

Austrella shivered from the cold and wetness of her gown. Liven led her to the nearest chair, but she leaned against it instead of sitting, while he scanned around for something.

When he pulled open the cupboards, she realized he was looking for towels to dry themselves off. "I think the towels are usually kept in the cupboard under the sink," she said.

He nodded, hurrying to the sink area, and found the cabinet beneath. He opened it and pulled out a white towel before walking to her and wrapping it around her.

Austrella stared at him, touched.

Her knees trembled from the kiss. She could barely believe it had happened. She was aware that she wasn't supposed to like it, but she loved every bit of it.

Austrella didn't know how long they had stayed kissing in the rain. Maybe fifteen minutes, or even hours perhaps, yet it wasn't enough. She could never get enough of him.

Liven left her side to get a towel for himself and returned with an extra one. She stared at him breathlessly as he began to wipe away the raindrops from her face. Her heart was still inflamed by their kiss, and now his act of care intensified it.

She flushed.

After drying themselves, they headed to the royal wing. The fireplace in the sitting room of the wing tempted her so that she could warm up, but Liven

suggested her getting changed first, so she rushed to her room and changed into a dry gown.

Austrella emerged from her room to find Liven seated on a plush sofa, near the flickering warmth of the fireplace. Without a word, she made her way to the fireplace, sitting down on the floor to bask in the soothing heat. Surprising her, Liven, ever the gentleman, didn't hesitate to join her, lowering himself beside her.

"So cold, isn't it?" Liven remarked, rubbing his hands together.

Austrella felt a twinge of guilt. "I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize," he said softly, and she felt his gaze flickering to her. "I don't regret it."

The heat of his gaze tempted her to gaze back and she couldn't resist it. She glanced back, their eyes locking for a moment. Her eyes flickered to his lips before she looked away quickly.

Austrella didn't regret it either.

"How... how did you see me? How did you see me escaping?"

"I couldn't sleep with the fear that you might try to escape again. My fears proved me right when I caught your shadow passing by."

She furrowed her eyebrows, turning her gaze to him as she continued to probe, "And what about yesterday? How did you know I was leaving then?"

"I was late for bed. On my way, I saw you passing. I suspected you were up to something and it turned out to be right. And now it looks like I will never be able to sleep well."

"You don't have to worry about today. I'm quite exhausted and won't go out again... but... *why* do you still want me? Why are you not letting me go?"

She heard him sigh before his eyes slid to hers with determination blazing in them. "Because I want you, Ella. I don't want anyone else but you. From the moment I saw you, I knew you're the one."

Heat coated her cheeks and guilt tugged at her. "But... but I keep running away."

"I know." There was longing in his ocean eyes. "But I also know that there will come a day when you will stop running, when you'll realize you belong with me. And I yearn for that day."

A knot twisted in her stomach at his longing words. Austrella wished to fulfill his wish, but she knew she mustn't. "But what if I escape to a place far away?"

"I'd find you," Liven spoke calmly, his gaze unwavering.

Austrella shook her head. She wanted to hope that he wouldn't find her if she left for Westlock. "What if it's *really* far away? Somewhere you can't find me."

"There's nowhere I can't reach, Ella. No place where I can't find you," Liven said, his words a calm flow of a river. "I will send out an army and will bring you back no matter where you run away to. Though, I ask you not to, but follow the desires of your heart."

She stared at him with a movement in her heart. No one had spoken to her like this; nothing had ever touched her heart so deeply before.

Remind me why I should leave this man, she thought, feeling utterly torn in between now.

Austrella looked away, her instincts warning her not to get affected by him; which kept happening all the time. Helpless, she shook her head, her heart heavy with the burden of her duty. "Liven... I can't. I told you I can't. I can't be with you. I have to go. I can't fail my family. I'm sorry if it hurts you but I need to go."

"Like I said, one day you will realize the truth and stop running."

"And one day you will know the truth too," she said. "Liven, please, you have to let me go. You need someone who won't run away from—"

"So are you telling me you felt nothing today?" Liven asked abruptly, his voice heavy. His question captured her attention. Hurt flashed in his eyes. "That you felt nothing back there in the rain? Nothing when I held you? Nothing when we kissed? Because *I* felt everything."

Intensity devoured the softness from his voice.

Guilt scratched her throat and a lump formed. She longed to tell him it was the best moment in her life and that she felt everything too. But her voice abandoned her.

Intense but desperate, Liven's eyes pierced hers, searching. "Tell me, Ella, did you not feel anything?"

Even if she could find her words, she knew she mustn't confess. But to see the hurt in his eyes hurt her even more. Helpless, she was only able to stare at him.

“Fine. I get it,” he muttered angrily, before rising to his feet and leaving for his room.

Tears sprang into Austrella’s eyes as she watched him stalk away. A few minutes ago, it was heaven, but now it was ruined. She didn’t want to cry over it or him, so she forced back her tears before heading back to her own room.

No matter how hurtful it was, it was for the best. It was the right choice, Austrella believed.

As the night passed and the morning light filtered into her room, Austrella stirred from her slumber. When she remembered the events of the night and her attempt to escape soaked in rain, she sighed.

But when she remembered the kiss in the rain, the passionate embrace with Liven that lasted longer than she would’ve possibly thought, her eyes snapped open. Remembering their conversation in the sitting room disappointed her. Her choice had ruined everything.

All the thoughts fled away when she felt her forehead burning. When she pressed a hand against it, she realized she had caught a fever.

Austrella groaned. Now her escape would have to be put on hold until she recovered.

She was bedridden for hours. When she finally woke up, the first thing that her eyes fell upon was the closed window, half soaked in a layer of snow. She couldn’t believe the winter had begun. It felt like a surreal transformation from the heavy rain of the previous day.

Her attention was turned when Maggie entered the room with a glass of water. “Oh, milady, you’re awake!” She greeted her with a warm beam. “How are you feeling now? His Highness mentioned the two of you played in the rain and that you might’ve caught a fever.”

Austrella’s eyes widened in surprise, while her heart leaped at Liven’s name. She was suddenly desperate to see him. “I think I’m getting better,” she replied, checking the temperature on her forehead and her neck with the back of her hand.

Maggie’s smile widened. “That’s good to hear because His Highness was restless and worried about you. He was here with you all the time and left only a few minutes ago. He really cares about you, milady.”

Guilt clawed at her, outweighing on her surprise.

How could he still care about her after everything she had said?

"I-I had no idea..." she muttered.

"He surely seems to love you," Maggie said delightedly, as she set the glass on the table near the bed.

Austrella's head shot up from the pillow in shock. The word '*love*' struck her with a rush of emotions she couldn't help.

"L-love?" Austrella stuttered. "I mean... no. I mean, he... he *does* care about me, but... *love*? Love doesn't come this fast."

The maid glanced at her tenderly. "Love has no conditions, milady. It comes in its own time, sometimes faster than we imagine, sometimes slow. The prince loves you. We can see that."

Her pulse quickened. Did... did Liven *love* her?

Austrella shoved away the thought as soon as it came. She couldn't let anything about Liven affect her. Because at the end of the day, she would escape.

She *had* to.

"Maggie, can you do a favor for me?" Austrella asked, slightly uncertain, but Maggie seemed to be her only chance.

Maggie nodded. "Yes, milady, what is it?"

"First, I need you to promise me you will not tell anyone about it."

The maid nodded again, attentively. "Of course, milady. You can trust me. Name what you need."

The next night after dinner, Austrella walked to Liven's study where she supposed he was. Taking a deep breath, she knocked on the door hesitantly.

"Come in," Liven called out.

Her anxiety surged, making her feel uncertain if she could do this. Heaving another deep breath, she opened the door and entered.

Liven sat behind a table full of scattered papers. His eyes met hers as soon as she entered. Surprise flashed on his face.

"I just want to say goodnight," Austrella spoke before he could, swallowing a lump in her throat. *I just want to say goodbye.*

"Heading to bed early?"

I can do this. She forced a smile. "Can't call it early. It's nearly ten. Besides, I feel quite exhausted. I guess it's the hangover from the fever." Her legs urged her

to walk near him, but she planted herself at the door, holding onto its knob, determined not to go near him, in case he saw through her façade.

“Yes, you should definitely rest,” he said with a faint smile. “The next time you go in the rain, think twice.”

Austrella laughed sadly, tears watering her eyes. She was going to miss him so much. To hide her miserable face, she forced another smile. “I promise. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Ella. Sleep well.” She heard him say as she turned away.

Closing the door behind her, Austrella leaned against it as a sob built up in her throat. She felt cruel for her attempt to hurt him with her escape tonight.

If there were anything that could undo her situation, she would’ve tried it. But there was no other option, and she had to do this.

For my brother. My parents and my people.

As she distanced herself from Liven’s study, her heart grew heavy. Each step forward took her away from him. Her heart yearned to turn and run back into his study and into his arms. She truly wished, and it only increased her tears and her pain.

This has to be done. I’m doing the right thing.

Austrella made her way to the music room. Once inside the secret passage, she lit the candle on its stand that she’d brought with her. It cast a flickering glow around her.

She had calculated that escaping at midnight would be too risky, as Liven would likely be watchful then. Therefore, she chose to escape at a time he least expected.

A tendril of fear curled in her stomach at the memory of the man she had encountered in the secret of the secret passageway. She knew it was dangerous, she couldn’t bear the thought of bumping into the wizard again, but the secret passage out to the woods was her only chance at escape. She hoped he wouldn’t be in her way.

Austrella opened the secret passage and stepped into the dark corridor. The narrow staircase led her down to the familiar junction with the three different ways. Her heart raced when she spied the middle one, the path that had led her to the wizard.

She hurried to the first one with silent steps. Her heart couldn't normalize its fast beats until she ventured deep inside it. The passage seemed to stretch on for an eternity, with some steep descents and tight bends until she finally reached the end.

A shaky breath escaped her lungs.

Placing the candle down, Austrella caught a ladder that lay covered in dust nearby. She seized it, placing it against the ceiling. Climbing the dusty rungs, she reached up and pressed her palm against the roof, whispering the secret phrase.

Just as the phrase left her mouth, a section of the roof—the trapdoor—slid aside and the world above came alive with the sounds of the forest. Chill rushed down the passage, enveloping her, and she caught a flicker of yellow light above.

Austrella moved the ladder to bridge the gap between her and the open space above. Carefully, she climbed up and emerged into the calm, snow-covered woods. Her eyes immediately fell upon a guard, holding a lamp and the reins of a horse that awaited her.

"Oh, sir, thank you so much!" Austrella greeted the guard as she climbed onto the ground. "How can I thank you for this?"

The lamplight caught the guard's smile. "You're welcome, milady. My sister, Maggie, entrusted me to help you. While we all appreciate you staying in the palace and changing the prince, it's best for you if you don't have marry him. He doesn't deserve you, not after everything he has done to our true royals. You deserve much better."

Austrella gulped the hardness from her mouth and nodded. "Thank you for your help. I'm forever—"

She paused as the trapdoor slid close, becoming concealed with a blanket of snow and bushes.

The guard handed her the reins and offered her the cloak he wore, saying, "You will need this since the snow may get heavier."

Austrella knew that journeying whilst snowing was dangerous, but she couldn't wait for it to stop snowing, she had to leave as soon as possible. She draped the cloak around her shoulders and thanked the guard again before hopping onto her new companion.

The guard buckled a small lamp securely in the reins of the horse, saying it might need it. Austrella turned away after thanking him one last time, holding

the reins with determination and urging the horse forward.

Thus, her journey began.

She rode deeper into the snowy woods and the lamp's soft glow cast light on the passing path before her. The woods were silent, the only sounds being the hooves of the horse tapping against the ground and the crunch of snow beneath it.

She was aware of the dangerous journey she'd chosen. If it weren't for the years she lived in the woods, she would've been scared to death already. She would have to travel through the woods until she left Catsimoor.

Austrella remembered her father telling her that, if they followed the right direction from the trapdoor, it would lead to the road that led to both the castle and his brother's manor.

She wanted to go to her uncle's first. However, instead of using the road, she decided traveling through the woods would be safer for her.

Austrella struggled not to think of Liven on her way. She didn't want to feel hesitant, because this was the right thing to do. Was it not?

Before long, Austrella reached the manor. She convinced the guards at the gate that she had an important message for the duke, and they let her pass through.

She dismounted in front of her uncle's manor. She was certain her uncle knew the truth by now, since Aquila was determined to help her. So, Austrella didn't want to leave without conveying a word.

She waited outside patiently, the snowflakes falling around her as a guard headed inside to inform the duke. A minute later, the guard returned and escorted her indoors. She was led to the drawing room and was asked to wait.

Within a matter of minutes, Uncle Travis entered the room, his expression a mixture of shock and surprise as their eyes met.

"Austrella!" Her uncle breathed with wide eyes, his voice a whisper.

Austrella couldn't help but melt when he called her by her name. "So you know?"

Her uncle hurried forth and enveloped her in a warm embrace. She couldn't contain her smile as she returned the hug.

"Oh, my dear girl, I cannot believe you're here, or that it *is* you." He pulled away to look at her face with unbelieving eyes. "Of course, of course, you look

like you, but hard to recognize, very hard. I cannot believe you were here in this house for nearly two months and we did not know..." He pulled her back to the hug, stroking her hair.

"I'm sorry I couldn't tell you."

"Why didn't you? You could have told us. You have no idea how our lives were ruined when we thought you all were... *dead*. Nothing was ever normal from then on. I wished we had known earlier... You could've told us. Why didn't you?"

A pang of guilt greeted her. "Papa and Mama thought it was best not to tell anyone. I'm sorry I didn't. I wanted to."

Travis pulled away to look at her again, with a tearful smile. She smiled back. "I can't believe you're alive. So alive! When Aquila told me, I was quite shocked that I almost set off to bring you back from the prince—until I realized it would put you in danger if your identity was revealed. But I was—hold on, what are you doing here at this hour?"

Austrella's smile faded, her face turning solemn. "I'm running away. I'm heading back to where my parents are. I wanted to say goodbye before I leave."

Travis furrowed his eyebrows. "Running away? So does that mean... he doesn't know? Did he do anything to you? Did he hurt you—"

"No!" she interjected quickly. "He didn't hurt me at all." She shook her head, her voice turning sorrowful. "Actually *I* hurt him. He was... he was good to me. But I have to run away, I have to leave him."

"You mustn't head back now, Ella," Travis said solemnly. "It's dangerous to travel back during winter—strange winter, that is—all the way to Westlock."

Austrella's eyes widened. "You... you know where we lived? But I-I didn't tell Aquil—"

"The enchanter, Lorcan, did," Travis revealed, clasping her shoulders. "He left only the day before yesterday. He told us everything, and I was shocked. Truth is always shocking. But Ella," his voice dropped low, eyes softening. "Why did you have to hide yourself from us? You have not a single idea how it hurt me to know you were working here and none of us knew—none of us recognized—"

"I'm sorry—"

"I'm hurt to know my niece was working in my house as a *maid* and that I saw her but didn't recognize her, that I kept grieving her. I would better get my

brother for doing such a thing to me! Does he not trust me at all?"

"Uncle," Austrella called him gently. "It's not about trust. We just thought... I'm sorry. Yes, you're right, I should've told you and it hurts me that I didn't. But... but I'm glad Aquila told you."

Travis shook his head. "Aquila was silent when I asked about you, after witnessing your farewells. She did not tell me then. It was Lorcan who revealed it. And in the morning, your maternal grandmother came asking about you; she noticed the gown. She made it, did she not? None of us knew about it until she said so. That is when Aquila revealed she knew."

Austrella's lips parted as she listened. "Oh, I had no idea. I did doubt if Grandma—oh Uncle, I wish to talk with you more but I need to leave *now*. I don't have more time. I need to leave Catsimoor as soon as possible—"

"You can stay here, I will keep you hidden. Traveling alone at this time, not to mention, during winter, is dangerous—"

"I know," Austrella said hastily. "But please trust me. I can't stay here, I need to go. Westlock is safer for me. He will not find me there. If I stay here, he will surely find out."

Travis appeared extremely bothered. "Did he do anything to you? Did he treat you badly?"

Her heart clenched at the thought of Liven. "No, he was good. So good. And I'm cruel. It's me who's cruel. But I have to leave before he finds out about my escape. I really want to see Aquila, Alondra, and Auntie but I have no time! So, can you please give this to them?" She pulled out a letter from the pocket of her gown and gave it to her uncle.

Her uncle nodded and took it from her. "But are you certain about this?"

Austrella gave him a confident nod. "Positive. Ten years of living in the woods has given me enough confidence that even if I don't know the way, I will get to where I want to. I'm certain of it. So you shouldn't worry about me. Oh, and please tell our family members that I miss them and love them so much and hope to see them soon."

"Oh, that reminds me! I was planning on visiting you tomorrow and giving you an important letter. Let me get it before you leave."

She nodded and her uncle sprinted out of the room. "I will be waiting outside!" she called out.

Austrella made her way out of the manor where her horse waited. Soon enough, Travis returned with the letter and handed it to her, saying, "There are several things to ignore in this letter since you're running away now. But I thought it was important if you know my plans."

Nearly five minutes passed as they exchanged hugs and goodbyes. As each minute ticked by, Austrella was anxious that Liven might have found out about her escape. Her worries ceased only a little when she started her journey from the manor to the woods, but several of them remained.

Austrella pressed onward through the woods, her heart beating as equally fast as the horse's running. The woods were blanketed in a thick layer of snow, appearing both serene and foreboding in the dim light of the night. The chill in the air was biting, but her determination made it so that it didn't bother her.

As she journeyed deeper and deeper into the woods, the relentless snowfall made the horse slow down, jogging instead. Time ticked away. Maybe hours dragged on. After what felt like an eternity of travel, she finally decided to stop and rest. She worried for her horse's health and decided rest was necessary.

Austrella found a sturdy branch. Clearing the snow off it, she sat down, taking out her uncle's letter from the pocket. The coldness seeped into her bones, but she paid it little heed as she unfolded the letter and began to read.

Dear Ella,

I hope you're reading this when you're alone. Make sure you burn it after you finish reading because no one must find out. There's much to say, but I've decided to tell you the short version. I must say I'm shocked to know the truth, I wish I had known earlier. But more than the shock, I'm relieved. I hope you're safe there and that he's treating you well. No matter what happens, do not let the prince find out about you. Lorcan, your friend, told me everything before he left, including the location, and I'm planning on reaching out to them soon. I hope you understand what I'm trying to say.

I promise I'm working hard to save you from the prince. There are many of us planning to overthrow him, and our plans are soon to be completed. We will save you, I promise. Until then, since you're living with him as his bride-to-be, there is something you can help us with. We all need to do our parts to get back what is rightfully ours. We need you to get closer to him and get answers about his powers. He has powers, the powers with which he took over Catsimoor, but after the invasion, he has never been seen using any. So you need to ask him about it and what he can do with it and how

powerful he can be. I trust you to ask him cleverly without letting him suspect you. You should pretend to be interested in him in order to get answers from him.

We cannot let him go after what he has done to us. We will take back the kingdom, they can return from WL, and our lives will no longer be in danger. You being his chosen bride is our chance to know about his powers and I believe you will use this opportunity well. I've been planning to bring him down since he overthrew our family, and now is the time. We are not only going to overthrow him but kill him once and for all. He destroyed our lives, so we destroy his. Lorcan is determined to do it as well, he promised to gather as many enchanters as possible. I promise you, Ella, peace will be restored soon. We are planning on working out our plans soon and killing him this month itself. There are several people with us, planning his end. And we all trust you to do your part. We will kill him soon, Ella, he will be dead soon and we will be free.

I'm sincerely looking forward to that day.

Wishing you well.

Sincerely,

The writer.

Austrella's mouth fell open in horror. Her body began shaking, and for a moment, she couldn't breathe.

Kill him?

Her eyes widened like saucers. The letter left her chilled to the very core. Her heart thundered with fear and disbelief.

No, no, no!

She began shaking her head frantically. A picture of Liven's body lying dead on the floor, drenched in blood, flashed across her mind.

"No!" she screamed, almost startling her horse. "No, no, no..." Her hands clutched her hair wildly.

She could never bear Liven being killed. The mere thought of it scared her. She couldn't let it happen, she mustn't let anyone lay a hand on Liven because...

Austrella held her breath in realization.

She cared about him more deeply than she had realized. She couldn't fathom anyone performing such an act on him.

He was the dark prince, yes. She was running away from him, yes. But she cared about him and she couldn't bear the thought of him being killed.

He was... he was *so* good to her. He gave her feelings like no one else had ever done. He had set her heart on fire.

He made her feel the happiest and most special when he held her, and when he kissed her. He comforted her when she needed it, and he defended her determinedly against a harsh king, his own father.

He swore to send out an army just to find her, and he wanted her and only her. Despite what he had done to her family ten years ago, he had been nothing but good to her.

The realization hit her like a thunderbolt. She wouldn't let her uncle's plan come to fruition.

No matter who he was, she wouldn't let anyone harm Liven. Her determination welled up, and she knew exactly what she had to do.

Austrella pushed herself to her feet and mounted her horse quickly.

No longer was she on a journey to Westlock, but back to the palace.

Back to Liven.

She needed to return to the castle as swiftly as possible, to inform Liven of the dangers that awaited him. No matter the obstacles she would face, she was resolved to protect the man who had unexpectedly become a part of her...

Part of her world.

Her life.

Her family would be furious over her decision. She no longer cared if her choice would fail and betray her family because Liven's life mattered to her.

He had captured her heart and she didn't realize it until now. Saving Liven's life was more important.

The night grew colder. Austrella rode her horse with haste, her determination to return to the castle burning brightly within her. The wind whipped through the trees, and the hoofbeats on the snow echoed her urgency.

Several minutes later, the calmness of the night was shattered by the haunting sound of a wolf's howl.

Her hands instinctively pulled at the reins, slowing her horse. She cast fearful and cautious glances in every direction.

She had no idea there were wolves in these woods. A mere thought of them sent chills slithering down her spine.

The howl was soon joined by several more, like an eerie chorus surrounding the place. The howls drew nearer and fear gripped her heart. Her eyes darted around the woods, trying to see any signs of the approaching threat. As she checked behind her, the horse came to an abrupt halt with a neigh.

Her attention snapped to the front and her blood turned cold, spotting a pack of wolves emerging from the shadows. Their eyes gleamed with an unsettling hunger.

Austrella gasped. Fear paralyzed her.

No, no, no! She had no weapon to protect herself.

The wolves bared their teeth menacingly and advanced towards her. The sight of their fangs and the glint in their eyes drenched her in terror.

Desperation gripped her. Austrella decided to turn her horse and made a hasty retreat. The horse moved faster, seeming to realize the danger, and put distance from the wolves. Casting a brief glance behind, Austrella saw the wolves chasing after them.

No, this was not right. Austrella needed to get back to the castle and inform Liven. She wanted to save him!

When she returned her gaze forward, her heart sank as she saw her path blocked by another pack of wolves. Her horse skidded to a stop as she pulled on the reins, eyes wide.

She shouldn't have escaped the palace. She should've stayed with Liven. She was safer with him. But she *had*, stubbornly, and now near to getting killed.

There was no doubt they wanted to kill. She realized she was going to die, and regretted her choice.

Liven had stopped her the last two times she attempted to escape, but now he was far away, unable to come and save her.

No, no one was coming to save her.

This was it. Princess Austrella of Catsimoor—the one people believed to be killed by the dark prince whom she wanted more than anything now—was truly going to be killed by a pack of wolves; because she ran away cruelly from the prince who wanted her desperately.

One of the wolves lunged at her horse, causing the frightened animal to rear up in terror, its hooves striking the air wildly. Austrella was thrown to the ground. She screamed as her body crashed into the snow.

Her horse bolted away in panic. None of the wolves went after the horse, and she watched in terror as her only hope of survival vanished into the dark woods, leaving her alone with her predators.

The hungry wolves fixed their eyes upon her, snarling, and advanced towards her. Austrella was drowned in fear. She was defenseless and hopeless. She lay in the snow, her breaths coming in ragged, shallow gasps.

Tears flooded her eyes. Her body shook violently. Then, she screamed in terror. Her cries echoed through the desolate woods with a stupid hope that it would scare off the wolves.

Snarling, a wolf was about to jump onto her, and in that heart-stopping moment, when the reality was freezing cold, when she believed all hope was lost, a voice shattered the moment, piercing through the chaos.

“Ella!”

Along with the eyes of the wolves, Austrella’s widened eyes snapped to her right, a loud gasp escaping her lips.

Liven.

Her Liven.

There he stood, just beyond the ring of wolves, shock and panic flashing across his face. His presence was both resolute and surreal.

Austrella’s heart would have burst out of her chest if it were possible.

Many of the wolves moved from her to him.

Liven raised his palm abruptly, and a brilliant, blinding light burst forth, enveloping the area. The wolves were thrown back into the darkness with a great force of the light.

Austrella watched in jaw-dropped awe and disbelief as Liven’s power sent the pack of wolves out of sight. The ground seemed to quake beneath her, and the sheer intensity of his power left her trembling with wonder.

However, as the radiant light subsided, she saw Liven himself being thrown backward by the very force he had unleashed to save her.

She gasped in horror. He vanished from her view and her panic returned tenfold.

“Liven!” Austrella screamed her lungs out, scrambling to her feet. Her limbs trembled.

The wolves were gone, their menacing presence vanished, and her immediate concern was for the man who had risked himself coming here to protect her. She rushed to the spot where she last saw him, her heart pounding faster in fear.

He wasn't there. She looked around for him frantically. "Liven!"

CHAPTER 12 | CHOICE

“Liven!” Austrella’s voice echoed through the snowy woods as she called out desperately.

Panic surged through her as she stumbled through the snow, her heart pounding at every step.

What had happened to him? She couldn’t figure out why his powers backfired, or so it seemed. The memory of him being thrown away by the force haunted her, and she couldn’t bear the thought of something happening to him.

Austrella searched, her breaths coming in short gasps as she moved through the woods. “Liven, where—” She gasped, stopping in her tracks at once.

She spotted him lying on the ground not so far from her. “Liven!” Her voice laced with fear as she screamed and rushed to his side.

He was sprawled on the snowy ground, his body shaking as he struggled to sit upright. Austrella fell beside him, reaching out to help him. “W-what happened? What’s wrong?” Her voice trembled with frenetic worry.

Liven didn’t respond as he attempted to sit upright again, and Austrella helped him. He slid backwards to get the nearest tree behind him and leaned against it. He appeared very tired, chest heaving heavily, and he was virtually panting. She moved closer to him, holding his hands, her eyes filled with fear.

“What happened? Tell me.” Her heart ached at his sight.

Whatever he did to save her had caused him pain.

Liven’s eyes fluttered open and closed constantly. He managed to say, “I... I... it was... backfired... a-and...”

Austrella’s eyes widened as she processed his words. “What? Why?”

“Distract me,” he implored in a whisper, his eyes squeezing closed as if he were in pain.

“What?” she asked, baffled, moving her hands to hold his beautiful face now drenched in pain.

Liven opened his eyes faintly, whispering desperately, “Dis-distract me. I-I made them... feel fear... pain and... powerless... and it backfired. I feel—distract me.”

Austrella scanned her head frantically for something to distract him. “Um... Oh! W-we’re going back to the palace together and I’m, I’m coming with you.” Words tumbled out her mouth in a rush. “I won’t leave you again—”

“Distract me,” Liven repeated, wincing in pain.

Tears welled in her eyes. She searched for something that would provide relief... something powerful enough to make one forget everything. But she didn’t know *what*. “We’re... we’re going to... um—host a ball!” She uttered the words in her frantic quest, but his pain seemed to persist. “A-a... private ball, for just you and I, and we’re going to have—”

“Distract—”

Austrella captured Liven’s lips in a desperate, passionate kiss, with his face between her palms. It wasn’t just about distraction; it was something she had wanted to do since their kiss in the rain. Her emotions overwhelmed her as she kissed him, feeling the warmth of his mouth against her own.

She could feel his shock, but almost immediately, he kissed her back in equal favor and deepened the kiss, his fingers touching her elbows. She couldn’t resist herself, she kissed him again, a bit too firmly.

She pulled away slowly, to find his eyes already upon her, but no longer drenched in pain. For a moment, she found herself lost in the depths of his ocean eyes, her heart still racing wildly from their passionate kiss. Her fingers traced his face hungrily, breathless.

“Are you okay now?” she whispered. Liven hummed in response, staring at her. “Are you really okay?”

Liven nodded, a faint smile on his lips. “Though it will take time to regain my strength, my love, you made the pain and fears go away.”

Austrella furrowed her eyebrows. “But why? Why would it backfire?”

His expression grew somber. “Because I’m cursed.”

Shock widened her eyes. “Cursed?” Austrella repeated, her voice barely above a whisper.

Thoughts spun in her mind as she recalled Travis' words from the letter. Was this why no one saw him using his powers after the invasion?

Liven nodded again, his eyes solemn. "Yes," he confessed. "Whatever I use my powers for, it will backfire. If I were to light a candle, I'd set myself on fire. But thank the Creator, that never happened."

"You're... cursed?" she repeated, voice filled with disbelief and horror.

"An enchanter cursed me because I took over the kingdom. I've never used my powers since then. Now is the first time in ten years."

It rang a bell in her memory and Austrella remembered his words about having faced a terrible experience an enchanter. At the time, she had told him he deserved it, but now she felt nothing but terror. "That's awful."

"I deserved it anyway." Regret flashed in those ocean eyes. "Though I had already regretted what I had done, as soon as I attacked the palace out of anger."

The mention of attacking the palace formed a knot in her chest, but it no longer angered her. "Though you knew it's dangerous to use your powers... you used it to save me... Why?" She felt a pang of guilt.

His eyes softened. "Saving your life is worth the pain."

Tears prickled in her eyes, and Austrella shook her head. "But I ran away. *Again.*"

"And I've caught you *again.*"

After all this time of believing that he didn't deserve *her*, now she felt like she didn't deserve *him*. "I'm sorry I left," she began. "I'm truly sorry—"

"It's okay," he interrupted softly.

"It's not okay!" The gnawing guilt raised her voice. "None of this would have happened if I hadn't run away! I wouldn't have been attacked by the wolves and you... you wouldn't have been like this! You sacrificed yourself for me, someone who hurt you, ran away, and is the reason you're now in this condition! It's all my fault—"

"It's not your fault, Ella, it's mine," Liven interrupted, his voice so powerless, but she could *feel* him wanting to sound firm. "It is all my fault. I messed it all up. And now it's time to make at least one of those things right." He reached his hand to her face and she leaned into his palm. "Ella, I didn't come here to bring you back. I came all the way to find you because you left without a goodbye."

Austrella held her breath. "What?"

"You came to me before you left. Saying goodnight, saying you were tired and needed rest—"

"You think it didn't hurt me?" she asked firmly, tears blurring her vision. "It hurt me so much that I had to leave! The look on your face, that smile... I knew it would haunt me forever because it hurt me that I was leaving!"

"And you have all the right to run away from me." He heaved a sigh. "Ella." His tongue caressed her name and he cupped her face, drawing her close. "Forcing you was so wrong of me. I thought it was the only way to make you stay, the only way to have you, and I regret it." His face became unreadable. "I should've never forced you but I did. Because I was so blind to think that I could have you. But I don't deserve you. You're an angel, I'm the opposite. You deserve better, I don't. But I was so selfish that I wanted you more than anything, because the moment I laid my eyes on you, my world turned upside down, and all I knew was I wanted you."

Austrella's tears slipped free, trailing down her cheeks.

"The maze wasn't where I first saw you. I was observing the ball from behind the curtain when you stepped in, and you were all the sun, the moon, and the stars yourself. Not believing what I felt, I left to the maze, where I *actually* met you. To block out your effect on me, I tried to be harsh with you until I realized you didn't know who I was. Talking with you had me wanting to know you more and I was more determined than ever to have you. I selfishly ignored the fact I didn't deserve you, because I wanted you; because you gave me this feeling I have never felt before. You made me feel *alive*. But I should've never forced you. I care about you so much, Ella, and I'm letting you go."

"Letting me go?" Austrella asked, her voice rising with a sudden shock and anger. She wanted him to be stubborn, to *not* let her go. "You're letting me go now?"

"I'm giving you the freedom to choose whatever you want," Liven said quietly, his eyes a whirlpool of unrecognizable emotions. "I want you, but I'm letting you choose your life. I don't deserve you, Ella. I'm a murderer; I've only destroyed lives—"

"But you're changed!" Austrella would have rejoiced if he had let her choose a few days ago, but now she didn't like it. Not even a bit.

“Yes, but that doesn’t change the past,” he said, and the regret in his voice was still there. “I can’t take back my actions, can I? Everyone sees me *through* my past, and I don’t blame them. I did the same until you stepped in. I knew I didn’t deserve you, but my selfishness never let me think straight until I saw that you had left again. Then it hit me, it hit me that you have all the right to run away. I’ve killed people, Ella, though unintentionally, I still did. Almost five people were killed when I attacked, and it haunts me; it’ll haunt me forever. I’ve never done the right thing, but now I want to change that. So I’m letting—”

“I’m not going anywhere!” Austrella exclaimed, her chin wobbling.

Liven’s eyebrows furrowed. “What?”

“I was coming back to you, Liven, I was *coming back*. That’s when I was attacked. Yes, I left the palace to run away, but I didn’t even reach midway when...” She trailed off, remembering the horrifying letter. She would tell him about it, but not now. “You asked for a chance, didn’t you? So, here I am, giving you a chance to prove yourself to me.”

Disbelief was etched on his face. “But you hate me.”

“Hate you?” Her eyes widened. “I don’t hate you! I did once with a reason, but you showed me you have changed. You are not who I thought you were and I couldn’t... I couldn’t hate you anymore. I tried to remain angry with you because I felt like... it was... rather a *duty* to hate you, to be against you; nothing but a duty, which I’m leaving behind because... my heart has decided to give you a chance.”

Liven stared at her with his lips parted and eyes wide. Something gleamed in his eyes, like wetness. “But my past is dreadful. I’m not worthy of you. I feel horrible now that I even forced you to say yes—”

“You didn’t force me to say yes. I said it by myself and I believe that. I believe whatever I said... and felt... was *real*.” Her breath became ragged as she continued. “When I told you I hated you, I didn’t mean it, but I was forcing myself to do it because you were...” *You were disarming me*. “I started not to dislike you. My anger started to wane.”

He gazed at her as if she was the glowing sun. “After everything I did, you’re choosing to give me a chance?”

She nodded hurriedly. “Yes, and you deserve it. I know you did horrible things, but knowing that you regret it, it makes me feel like... giving you a chance

is the right thing.”

Austrella had chosen. Running away from him to not fail her family and people wasn’t the right thing anymore.

Her hands closed around his hand that cupped a side of her face. This man was something.

After spending all these days blocking out her feelings, they now consumed her, and she knew what she wanted: *him*. She gave in to the burning flames and they took control.

“I’m choosing you.”

His eyes sparkled with tears. “And you won’t regret it, I promise.” Liven enveloped her in his arms. She didn’t hesitate to lean into his embrace and lie her head on his chest, feeling the fast rhythm of his heartbeat.

She couldn’t deny the feeling that she belonged nowhere but here in his arms.

Liven had disarmed her long before she knew he did, and now deep inside her, she forgave him. “Have you—” She trailed off as her ears caught the sounds of hooves. “I think—”

“Your Highness!” A guard on a horse entered the line of her sight, holding a lamp out to light the way. Following him, many others appeared, each carrying a lamp.

Austrella pulled away from Liven hastily, her eyes widened in surprise to see them. She’d thought Liven had come for her alone.

“Are you alright, Your Highness?” one of them asked.

“Of course,” Liven responded with a smile as he rose to his feet and helped Austrella up. “I’m perfectly alright, thanks to my lovely bride.”

Austrella couldn’t help but blush and smile at his words, feeling another layer of warmth spreading through her. “I didn’t know you brought them with you,” she murmured.

Liven turned to her, his smile twisting to a smirk. “Well, forgive me. I know it would’ve been more romantic if I came alone, but since I didn’t know where you had gone, I needed help.”

She flustered and rolled her eyes to cover it. As she opened her mouth to reply, a guard on a horse approached them, holding the reins of another. Liven

muttered a *thank you* as he reached for the reins. Austrella realized it was his horse.

“Do you think you can ride?” she asked him quietly.

“Rest assured, I feel quite better now.”

Austrella worried about his health after witnessing his terrible curse. She glanced around for an extra horse, but as there seemed to be none, she turned to him. “My horse ran away.”

“It’s okay, because you’re riding with me either way.” He mounted his horse. He extended an arm to help her up and she accepted it, flinging herself atop the horse behind him.

Austrella wrapped her arms around his waist, pressing herself against him, and rested her chin on his shoulder. Her heartbeat quickened in exhilaration and the deep connection with the man who was capturing her heart, cherishing the sensation of his warmth. It just felt so... homely. So comforting and... *right*.

Liven closed his hand on hers, sending additional heat waves, and the winter didn’t bother her the slightest. He craned his neck, glancing back at her with a charming smile.

“Admit it, you love hugging me.”

A blush seared her cheeks. “I definitely don’t hate it,” she replied, a hint of playfulness in her voice.

The horses moved forward, half of the guards ahead of them and the other half behind. On their way, Austrella could only think of Liven and his proximity, and she didn’t feel the length of their journey.

A few minutes later, the guards who led the way brought their horses to an abrupt halt, lifting their lamps higher as they looked around.

“What’s wrong?” Liven inquired, halting his own horse.

The cautious way they scanned the surroundings made Austrella’s heartbeat quicken. She pressed herself even closer to Liven and glanced behind them to see the guards trailing behind also coming to a halt.

“I heard something, not far from here,” one guard informed them, darting his eyes between the trees.

Austrella strained her ears, trying to catch any sound. Were the wolves that attacked her coming to attack them again? Or was it something else?

The cracking noise of a dry branch came, followed by a chorus of noises.

“Did you hear that?” one of the guards asked.

“Stand on your guard and be ready,” Liven ordered, his hand gripping the hilt of the sword around his waist.

Austrella tried to listen again, and then there came a sound of thudding hooves. Following it, the neigh of a horse pierced the crisp night air. She felt Liven tense, and he drew out his sword.

The guards’ postures were tense as they drew out their swords as well. Silence engulfed the woods as all of their gazes darted through the forest.

For a brief moment, everything seemed to slip back into an eerie silence until an abrupt rustling of leaves and thudding of hooves shattered it, the sounds not so distant. Her muscles tensed, senses on high alert as she glanced to her right, and caught a movement amid the shadows.

Before Austrella could register what was happening, an arrow flew out of the darkness and lodged itself into the flank of Liven’s horse. The horse cried in agony and reared up violently.

Austrella lost her hold around Liven and was thrown off the horse to the snow-covered ground.

The fall was abrupt and startling. She heard Liven calling her name. The snow cushioned her, but as soon as she tumbled down, her eyes caught a nightmarish scene.

Three arrows came out of nowhere and struck Liven’s arms within a matter of a heartbeat. A cry of agony escaped him. He was jerked from his horse, falling to the ground quickly that startled the horse. His horse panicked and bolted away.

“Liven!” Austrella screamed in panic, her voice fraught with anguish and shock. The sound of her scream echoed through the woods. She crawled him hastily, fear gripping her like a vice, the snow biting at her fingers.

As she neared him, startling her, another arrow struck him right below the chest and he groaned in pain.

Anguish clawed at her own heart.

“Liven!” Austrella cried again and reached him.

Her vision blurred with tears and her heart was a tempest of emotions when she saw him, wincing in pain, his face contorted with agony as he lay on the

ground with four arrows pierced into his flesh. The snow around him now turned red with his blood.

“Liven! Oh my heart, no, no, no!”

His pain was palpable.

The guards rushed to the prince immediately and surrounded him, worry radiating from them as they panicked.

“Please, help him! Do something!” Austrella cried.

The guards took charge and began their work. Liven groaned in pain.

With her trembling hands, she lifted his head from the snowy ground and placed it on her lap. “Y-you will be okay, you’re going to be alright,” she whispered brokenly, hardly holding back her sobs. Her fingers brushed through his hair as she cradled his face in the hope of comforting him, with a silent prayer for his recovery.

Her heart broke as she glanced down at his face, keeping her eyes away from his terribly injured arm where the guards were working. She thought they would pull out the arrows, but then she realized pulling out would make things even worse.

His face was so pale, his usually vibrant skin drained of its color. His body shook uncontrollably, wracked with pain, and his breaths were coming out in shallow, labored gasps.

Even in the midst of his pain, his eyes fluttered open slowly at her words. His once bright and most lively eyes were now filled with fear.

“Ella,” Liven gasped, his voice barely above a whisper, his lips quivering.

Austrella leaned down closer to him. “Liven.” She sobbed. “You’re going to be alright, you’re going to be fine, okay? It’s going to be fine. Y-you just have to stay with me, okay? We’ll get through this together, I promise.”

Austrella couldn’t bear to see him like this, lost in fear and pain, fighting for his life. She feared that he would slip away, that the darkness might claim him.

No! Her mind screamed and she held him closer. She would not let him go.

He shouldn’t *dare* leave her.

“E-Ella,” Liven called her in urgency. His eyes opened again, lips parting to call her, “Ella.” For a fleeting instant, it seemed as though he wanted to say something more, something so important.

“Yes, yes, I’m here. I’m here with you, and I won’t leave you, ever. I’m right here, and we’re going to make it through. Just stay with me,” Austrella pleaded as she gently brushed a stray lock of his hair from his forehead and stroked his face in comfort. “Liven, you hear me? You have to stay with me, okay?”

“E-Ella.” His voice broke out as a gasp again. “I... I... I love you.”

Her breath hooked. Her heart shattered into a million pieces. It was as if the world stopped, and all that remained was the echoing of those three words.

He... he *loved* her?

It rather seemed like the confession was a farewell, as if he thought he was going to die.

Her shock was overwhelming, a flurry of emotions crashing down upon her. Her body shook violently with sobs, and she shook her head frantically. “Liven, promise me you won’t leave me—” Austrella began, her words a plea, but they were cut off as Liven groaned in excruciating pain when the bandages tightened.

Furious and terrified, Austrella snapped her gaze towards the guards. “Don’t you see it’s hurting him more? You’re putting him in more pain!”

One of the guards turned, face etched with concern, and responded in a helpless tone, “We have no other choice, milady. The bandages must be tightened in order to prevent more blood loss. It’s the only way to help His Highness to get him back to the palace.”

Austrella understood he was right, but the sight of Liven writhing in pain was unbearable. It was as if she had his pain.

When she turned her gaze back to Liven, her world began to shatter. His eyes started to close. “No! No, Liven, stay with me! Don’t leave me!” she pleaded, her voice shattering by heavy sobs.

She couldn’t lose him, he meant so much more to her than she had ever realized. He had become a part of her life.

He had torn down her walls and took hold of her heart when she tried to block him. Now she’d give anything to save his life. Her life would be forever ruined if he left her.

No matter what she tried to say, his eyes fluttered closed finally. Her heart pierced with pain like a thousand knives.

A horrible cry tore out her throat. *No, no, no! Please don’t leave me!*

“He is still breathing! We have to get him back to the palace now!” One of the guards shouted urgently, snapping Austrella’s attention to them.

Her heart rose; there might be a chance for his survival. There must be.

The next moments were a blur. Liven was taken from her lap and the guards laid him on the horse’s back between two guards. Through her blurry vision, she saw the horse set off quickly, followed on either side by two other guards on horses.

One of the guards approached Austrella as she sat unmoving on the snow, watching the horse disappearing from her sight with Liven.

“Milady, you should come with me. We must leave now.”

Austrella looked up at him and nodded. She was powerless, yet she tried her best to get to her feet. The guard hopped on his horse and offered her a hand. Before she took his hand, she looked around to see any signs of the attackers.

“The others have gone in search of the attackers. But I need to get you back to the palace quickly. We expect another attack.”

With a shaky sigh, Austrella hopped onto the horse. “Will he... will he be alright?” she asked, her chin wobbling as she tried to suppress her sobs.

She heard the guard sighing. “Lives are in the Creator’s hands,” he replied solemnly before urging his horse forward.

As they rode towards the castle, the night was colder than before, without Liven. Austrella’s heart was heavy with endless cries. Her thoughts were consumed by Liven’s well-being. No matter who he was or what he had done in the past, only now did she realize it; he had captured her heart completely.

It struck her even more how much Liven meant to her. She prayed to the Creator to keep him alive, promising that she would do whatever it took to ensure his safety.

The fear of losing Liven, whom she didn’t know had *become* her heart until then, was overwhelming. Losing him would be like losing a part of herself.

On their way, her mind raced with several questions and suspicions.

Was her uncle behind this attack? Had he orchestrated this attack since he had hinted at planning to kill Liven? The thought fueled her anger. She would stop her uncle; she would stop everyone who wanted to hurt Liven.

Liven didn’t deserve to die. He loved her, and it was more beautiful than everything else; the most beautiful thing she had ever heard. And she wanted to

hear it again.

And again.

Austrella felt undeserving. It was her fault that all this happened. If she hadn't run away, none of this would've happened. Yet...*yet* he loved her.

Before long, they reached the castle. Thankfully, Liven had reached there earlier and would be getting treatment now. Austrella dismounted the horse and ran inside the castle. The guard accompanying her tried to keep up, but her urgency was unmatched.

She paid little attention to the servants bustling around, her focus on finding Liven. As she reached the royal wing, she spotted a group of guards standing outside Liven's room. They were conversing until they caught sight of her and turned to her. But Austrella set her eyes on the door as she sprinted towards it.

A guard stepped forward swiftly. "Milady, you cannot go inside now. No one is allowed in at the moment."

"I just want to see him," she begged. "Please let me through."

The guard stood firm, blocking her path. "I apologize, milady, but the doctor is tending to him, and it's best not to disturb them."

Austrella didn't care because she wanted to see him and stay by his side desperately. "But I need to be with him. I promised him. I want to know if he's alright. Please, just let me through."

The guards exchanged glances and another one of them stepped forward, saying, "We understand your concern, milady, but it's for the best. Once the doctor is finished, you will be able to see him." This one had a kinder voice than the other.

Her desperation wanted her to fight until they gave up, but she knew arguing further wouldn't help change their minds. She nodded instead and asked, "Is he... is he okay? Is he still... breathing?"

The guards exchanged another glance and nodded in assurance. "Yes, milady. He is still breathing, thank the Creator. We just need to wait for the doctor's report to know more about his condition."

Austrella nodded. "Do you know who attacked us? Have you found out anything yet?"

The first guard shook his head. "Not yet. The guards who went to investigate have not returned, and we still do not have any information on the attackers.

However, rest assured, we will find out. We will not stop until they're found."

Austrella nodded again. She could only hope that they would stop her uncle from his plans.

When the guards returned to their chatter, Austrella moved closer to Liven's door, her emotions threatening to overcome her. The guards watched her closely, as though ready to stop her if she attempted to enter before the doctor was finished.

She slid down the wall and sat on the cold floor, the hold on her tears loosening. She buried her face in her knees, shoulders shaking as she cried to the Creator.

After what felt like an eternity, the door finally opened. Austrella jumped to her feet. The doctor, an elderly man with glasses perched low on his nose, stepped out.

"How is he? Is he alright?" she inquired hurriedly.

The doctor turned to her with a solemn expression. "His Highness has suffered multiple wounds. The arrows that struck him caused significant damage, especially the one near his chest. His unconscious state is likely due to a combination of the pain, blood loss, and the shock his body endured. We will continue to observe him closely and provide the best care we can, but I must emphasize that his condition remains critical. The chance of survival is doubtful."

Austrella's heart sank at his last words. She didn't want to listen to the rest of the words he had to say.

She rushed into the room, her eyes landing on two unfamiliar faces talking quietly next to Liven's bed. Their expression of sympathy told her everything she didn't want to hear. Seeing her, they hurried to leave.

Austrella ran to Liven's bed, her heart sinking even more. He looked pale and fragile. His injured arm was wrapped with bandages. His chest rose and fell faintly, the only sign that he still clung to life.

Tears flowed down her eyes like an endless river. She sat beside him on the bed and reached out to touch his cheek. He felt cold.

"Liven," she whispered his name, hoping that he would wake up, that this nightmare would end. But he remained lost in the depths of his unconsciousness.

She couldn't bear it. *He can't be dying!* He mustn't leave her.

Austrella leaned closer. Her trembling fingers caressed his cheek. “L-Liven, please wake up,” she pleaded, staring at his beautiful face. “P-please don’t... don’t you dare leave me. I swear... I swear that will be the biggest mistake you’ll ever make. You mustn’t leave me. You can’t leave me alone. I-I’ll hate you if you leave me... I’ll be forever mad at you. So wake up. I need you, Liven. So much. I need you more than you’ll ever know. You promised me... you promised that you’ll ask the Creator to take us *together*, so don’t you dare leave me here alone.”

It was more painful to see him not responding. She cried her eyes out, leaning her forehead against his, calling his name, begging him to come back to her. She would do anything to get those beautiful eyes open, to see those lovely lips smile, and to hear his beautiful voice.

Choking back a sob, she kissed him gently, praying it would wake him up, but it hurt her when he didn’t kiss back. She would do anything to make him kiss her back.

Pulling back, her fingers traced the contours of his face. Her touch lingered on his lips, remembering the warmth they once held. Then she moved to his strong jawline and his closed eyes, her touch tender as she traced the curve of his eyelids with desperation to see them open.

Then, Austrella lied beside him, her movement careful and gentle.

Suddenly, the doors flung opened. Austrella was startled and turned her head to see the king enter.

She tensed a little, watching King Leopold striding towards the bed. He stopped near the bed, glancing at his son blankly. She expected him to be shocked, sad, or worried, but he was none of those. His face was emotionless and unyielding as he looked at his injured son.

How could one possibly look emotionless when their family was in such a terrible situation? Or, did he not love him at all? From the interaction between them, she’d learned that they weren’t close. They had even acted as strangers to each other most of the time.

Then the king’s eyes turned to her. “He is stupider than I thought, to chase after someone so worthless. This is his and your fault. Not mine,” he accused blankly before leaving.

Austrella was suddenly overcome by guilt. Yes, it was completely her fault, and she hated herself for it.

But she couldn't understand how the king could be so unfeeling towards his son's situation.

Austrella swore not to leave Liven's side until he woke up, which she insisted he *must*. She reached out slowly and held his hand. The arrows piercing him surfaced to her mind and she pushed it away, praying to the Creator desperately for mercy.

Amidst the guilt and sorrow, she felt a glimmer of something else—an intense feeling. Her feelings ran deeper than she thought, stronger than she expected. It was more like...

She loved him.

This very situation made her realize she was actually in *love* with him, a feeling that used to terrify her. It had him confess his love, too.

The thought of his confession increased her sobs. It was almost unbelievable, but also the most beautiful thing she'd ever heard.

Oh, how much she wished she had known that she loved him earlier so she wouldn't have tried to escape. She wished she hadn't run away from her feelings just because they terrified her.

She had fallen for the enemy, and there was no turning back now.

CHAPTER 13 | RESURGENCE

The first thing Austrella remembered when her eyes opened next was that she loved Liven.

Sunlight filtered into the room through the curtains, and at the realization that it was morning, she sat upright. She couldn't believe she had slept. She had not planned to close her eyes for a minute but stubbornly stay up until he woke up. However, because of her exhaustion, she had failed.

Her eyes turned to Liven next to her in alarm and saw his chest rising and falling evenly. A deep breath escaped her. She didn't know what she would've done if he had no movement. But thank the Creator, he was still alive. A relief, to know he was still with her, filled her.

Her dried eyes suddenly began to tear up.

Would he ever wake up, or would he slip away?

She leaned down to him, running her fingers through his dark hair gently before touching his face, which was now warm. He looked peacefully lost in slumber, but it was a bitter sight.

"Oh, Liven, when will you wake up?" she whimpered. "How long must I wait?"

Seeing the door open from the corner of her eyes diverted Austrella's attention. She turned to find Maggie entering.

"Oh, milady, you're awake! Is His Highness..." She trailed off, her eyes moving to Liven's unconscious body. A frown crossed Maggie's face and Austrella turned back to Liven with a frown of her own. "I came to tell you that breakfast is ready, milady. I came earlier but you were still asleep and I couldn't disturb you."

Her eyes widened in shock, her focus shifting from Liven to her maid. "Breakfast? Do you expect me to eat when he's like this? Oh, is the king having

breakfast?”

Maggie nodded. “He... he had it already.”

“Of course, I shouldn’t be surprised.” She scoffed bitterly, anger surging in. “He doesn’t care about his son, does he? I’m sorry, but I will not eat until he’s awake.”

Maggie nodded with an understanding look. “As you wish, milady. But should you not change your dress?”

She almost opened her mouth to protest, but then remembered falling off the horse twice. She sighed in defeat. “You’re right. I need to change.”

Austrella climbed down from the bed reluctantly, feeling so powerless that she struggled to carry her own weight. “It’s my fault, isn’t it?” She turned to Maggie with teary eyes. “If I hadn’t run away, none of this would have happened.”

Maggie’s face was now filled with empathy. “Only after I arranged everything to help you did I realize it was not fair, not when the prince wanted you desperately. But since my lady made it sound so important, I was left with no choice.”

Austrella bit her lip, tears threatening to spill over. “I-I was just... terrified of what I was feeling for him, so I wanted to... *stupidly* wanted to run away, before... before it got wild.”

But it was already wild then, and now it was unstoppable.

Maggie’s face softened. “He loves you, milady, so much. The way he looks at you says it all. We noticed that since the day you arrived. The way he would look at you spoke out his feelings.”

Her tears fell. Austrella could barely hold back her sobs. “I know. I...” She turned to Liven and leaned down to press a kiss on his forehead before turning to make her leave. “I need to get changed.” She hurried to the door and left the room, a sob breaking out.

How long would her already broken heart keep breaking? Would he open his eyes again?

She passed the king’s door on the way to her room, sparing it a glance of disbelief from what she had heard earlier, and did a double take when her eyes caught something flashing—a red light—through the keyhole of the doorknob. The light vanished as swiftly as it appeared, leaving her perplexed.

Her eyes narrowed in suspicion.

Curiosity took her towards the king's door, but she was careful to keep her movements careful and silent. The fear of being caught spying on the king pulsed through her as she approached the door.

Austrella heard a faint sound from inside, like an object tumbling to the floor. Her instincts told her to retreat, but she needed to know what was happening. Slowly, she pushed the door open just a fraction. Her curiosity pushed her to peek inside through the small gap.

And what she saw shocked her to her core.

The wizard she'd encountered in the secret passageway was in there, his face partially visible, but she recognized him instantly.

Terror wrapped around Austrella. She barely held back a gasp. What was he doing in the king's chamber?

He lifted a small, red vessel in his hand as if examining it closely. The vessel gleamed. Then he turned in her direction.

Austrella turned away from the door rapidly in fear and hurried into her room, hastily closing the door behind her.

Her stomach churned with unease, her breath catching as she tried to make sense of the situation.

Why was that man in the king's room? The last time she had seen him, he was furious at her for coming to his place, as he seemed not to expect anyone to be able find him. So what was he doing here? Did the king know about him?

Then another thought struck her.

Did the king *keep* him?

Fear and shock gripped her as she remembered the threat he'd made. If she hadn't known Travis' plan already, she would have thought this man was behind the incident.

The wizard was in the royal wing and Liven was not safe, even though she had kept the promise and didn't tell anyone about his location.

She mustn't leave Liven's side for even a second.

Austrella rushed back to his room without changing her gown. She walked over to him, climbed onto the bed beside him, and propped her head up on her arm, her gaze fixed on him. Her trembling hand reached to cradle his face.

If only he could feel her and know her touch, her love for him...

“Things are getting so horrid now, Liven, and I wish you could just... if you could just open your eyes.” Her hand slid down to his. “You have no idea how much it kills me to see you like this.” She intertwined her fingers with his. “I-I’m so sorry. This is... this is all my fault. And I’m sorry I hurt you so much. I know I’ve said I hated you, but the truth is that I *couldn’t* hate you. I actually fell in love with you from the moment I met you. Terrified of my feelings for you, I forced myself to hate you, but the harder I tried to hate you, the harder I fell for you. I was afraid of giving you, the dark prince, a chance; it meant I was failing my family because... you were always my greatest enemy. But nothing has ever felt so right than giving you a chance. Than choosing you over my duty to hate you...”

She spoke to him, believing somehow that through his unconsciousness, he could hear her.

“No matter who you are—” Austrella broke off with a gasp. She felt a faint, gentle squeeze in their joined hands, and her eyes widened as saucers in utter shock.

He was responding. He was fighting to wake up, to reach out to her.

“Liven? *Oh Liven*, did you just... did you just do that?”

Faintly, Liven squeezed her hand again, as if in response.

She choked out a sob in happiness and relief. He was not giving up. Yes, he was coming back to her. She continued to speak and he kept squeezing her hand faintly, a silent but powerful affirmation that he was there, that he was listening.

Then as she continued, a small sigh escaped him, making her heart pound wildly. It was only a small victory, but in that moment, it felt like the greatest triumph of all.

Austrella watched his face with hope-filled eyes. She kept whispering his name. His eyes had a movement as if he squeezed them faintly.

Then, ever so slowly, they began to flutter open, a sight that filled her with relief and unbridled joy.

His eyes, when they finally opened, were heavy and weary, and they met hers.

“Liven!” She cried in happiness, leaning down and cupping his face with both hands. “Oh, Liven, you’re awake! You’re finally awake!” She couldn’t resist herself and kissed his forehead tenderly. “I was worried sick about you! You scared me no end! But, oh, thank the Creator, you’re finally awake!”

Liven gazed at her with such fragility, and his lips parted slowly. “Ella...” Her name left his lips like a reverent whisper, weak and barely audible.

“I’m here, I’m here, I’m right here with you.” Her voice shook with joy and relief. “You have not a single idea how much you scared me! I was so scared! I-I thought... I thought I lost you! But you’re awake!”

Her heart soared as the man she loved smiled faintly, and it was enough to lighten the world around her. Austrella couldn’t help but smile back between her tears.

“I was... I was dreaming about you,” Liven whispered, his words coming out slowly.

Austrella laughed through her tears. “What?”

His smile widened slightly. “W-we were... dancing.”

“I promise we will, as soon as you recover.” She had never smiled so wide in her entire life before. “Oh, Liven.” She leaned closer, caressing his face. “You have no idea how broken I was... I felt like I couldn’t live without you. I felt—” She paused quickly, realizing it was unwise to confess her pain; it would only deepen his. “Tell me, how are you feeling? Are you feeling any better?”

Though Liven’s gaze was weak, it held softness and warmth that melted her heart. “Heaven and hell.”

Austrella blinked. Had he already begun being sarcastic as soon as he woke up? “What?”

“Your touch... it’s like heaven. And the pain, it’s like hell.”

Guilt squirmed within her. “I’m so sorry. It’s my fault. If I hadn’t run away, none of this would’ve happened—”

“Ella, you can tell me anything except blaming yourself. Because it’s not your fault. It’s mine.”

“It’s not your fault! Liven, we’ve talked about this, and this is not your fault! Not in any way—”

“I forced you.” No matter how weak he sounded, he seemed to have the energy to blame himself.

Austrella shot him a glare as if it was the only way to silence him. “We’re not talking about this now, definitely not when you just woke up after hours of crushing me in pain! You have no idea how much you worried me. I don’t know what I would’ve done if you... you had left me.”

"You would've been free of me."

"You little scoundrel!" she cried in fury, glaring hard at him. Nevertheless, her glare softened when Liven chuckled slightly, and it was the most beautiful melody she'd ever heard. "I don't, ever, want to be free of you, I swear."

"You're stuck with me." His weary eyes gleamed.

"And *you* are stuck with *me*." She grinned. Suddenly, in realization, she pulled back. "Oh! I need to inform the doctor and others! Everyone was worried—"

Liven's uninjured arm caught her hand as she began pulling away from him. "Don't leave me," he whispered.

Austrella's heart swelled and she leaned back down to him. "But shouldn't we let them know you're awake, hmm?" She intertwined their fingers and reached her other hand to his face.

"I heard what you said," Liven said instead, his voice quiet. "That you couldn't hate me. That you fell for me from the moment we met. Is that true?"

Tears blurred her vision as she nodded. "I would never lie to you about it. But... but you... you heard me?"

His ocean eyes lit up slowly. "Ella, your words broke through my unconsciousness, and I was trying harder and harder to reach up to you, like swimming up through an ocean. You made me fight; you gave me the strength to fight for my life. You awakened me."

She squeezed his hand, smiling through her tears. "I was worried that you wouldn't wake up, and it hurt so much to see you... unconscious." She sighed. As if hit by a thunderbolt, she jolted up suddenly. "I need to inform everyone or it would be completely unfair. Everyone is worried."

Austrella dashed out of the royal wing and passed the word to the guards patrolling, asking them to spread the word, before she rejoined Liven's side. Before long, the doctor, his assistants, and a few courtiers who had just arrived to see him rushed into the room.

The doctor asked Austrella to leave the room as well as everyone, as he needed to check on Liven's wounds.

But Liven swore that he would die if she left, at which the doctor couldn't press further. Austrella grinned in triumph before shifting her seat to his uninjured side, keeping her eyes averted from whatever the doctor was about to do.

Suddenly, the doors flung open and King Leopold marched in, shooting a grimy look at the elderly doctor. "I thank you for your service, doctor, but I assure you there's no need for your medical attention anymore. I have a magical liquid that can heal him completely."

He held up a small, tiny, red vessel.

The air left Austrella's lungs.

It was the same vessel she saw the wizard holding.

Austrella paled in terror, her heart cinching.

Her mind began to scream, her senses on high alert. It was now confirmed that the king had something to do with the wizard.

"Oh, that is great news, Your Majesty," the doctor said, adjusting his glasses on his nose before stepping back.

King Leopold opened the vessel and lent down it to Liven. "Here, drink this. You will be healed in a few minutes."

Liven's uninjured arm moved to receive it. But Austrella, who had been hugging that arm, slumped it down in panic.

"B-but would it—would it be safe? I mean... can you trust it? Does it have any side effects? Is it tested?" she asked frantically.

The king arched an eyebrow at her. "What nonsense. Would I give my son something untested?" he asked her coldly.

Maybe he was right. Maybe he asked the wizard to make it for him, something not harmful. But it didn't help her panic. "O-of course not, b-but..."

"This is a magical healing elixir, you stupid girl." The king hissed, his patience wearing thin as he glared at her.

"Father," Liven warned, his voice not weak anymore.

King Leopold glared at her once more before pushing the vessel towards Liven. "Drink it now."

Austrella watched helplessly as Liven accepted it. Surely, the king wouldn't give anything poisonous to his son, would he? She hoped there was nothing to worry about. Liven raised the vessel to his lips and drank it.

"Hmm." Liven sighed, as if in relief, before he handed back the empty vessel to the king and shot Austrella a smile, murmuring, "I feel better now."

"Or is it a psychological thing?" she asked, but tried to calm her worries. He did seem alright.

"No, it actually started its work, and all injuries will be healed within minutes," the king said, before hastily making his leave. The doctor and others bid their farewell as well and left them both alone.

"Did they find the attacker?" Liven's question diverted her gaze from the door to him. His voice sounded better now, and she hoped it was a good sign.

"No." Austrella frowned. Shaking her head, she continued, "I don't think they have. But... I think I know who it is."

Liven furrowed his eyebrows. "You do?"

"I will tell you everything once you are healed."

"I am getting healed. Come on, tell me, I don't like to be kept waiting."

Inhaling deeply, Austrella began telling by seeing the wizard in his father's room; that subject seemed more important. Liven listened to her silently until she finished. His shock was palpable, and like her, he confessed the doubt that his father might be keeping the wizard in secret.

But for what? She wondered, and he confessed he had no idea either, but promised to find out.

At first, he suggested confronting his father, but Austrella protested. If the man were his secret, the king wouldn't be pleased that she had found out. Liven agreed with her and promised to find another way.

Then she told him about the duke's letter. The words tumbled out of her mouth like a flowing river, and Austrella ended up in tears, blaming herself in the end.

"It's not your fault, Ella," Liven admonished her firmly, reaching his uninjured hand to cup her face. She sat beside him while he remained lying on the bed. "It's the duke's fault. He was planning this."

Austrella shook her head in disagreement. "But if I hadn't run away, he wouldn't have been able to do this! And *ugh!* He's trying not just to overthrow you, but kill you. He almost did! I have to go and stop him, stop everyone—"

"Don't be stupid," he interjected softly. "He might hurt you, to stop you from stopping him. I won't let you go."

He's my uncle and he won't hurt me. She wished to tell him the truth, but this was not the best timing. Liven was already shocked about his father and the wizard.

"Someone has to stop him, and it has to be me."

“No, it just has to be someone. Someone *else*. We will think of another way, okay?”

Austrella closed her eyes and sighed before nodding, telling herself to calm down. When she opened her eyes, they softened at his warm glance on her, and she couldn't stop herself from voicing her thought, “I wonder how can he ever think of killing you.”

“Because I'm the dark prince, am not I? Overall, they believe I killed the royal family.” Liven breathed sharply before opening his arms. “Now, come here.”

A blush and a smile crept to her face and she leaned into his arm, but paused suddenly. “Wait, it would hurt you...”

“Trust me, it was not a psychological thing. I feel like the pain is already gone. Like I'm fully healed.”

“Already? Is it that fast?”

“Should I check?” He raised an eyebrow, and not waiting for her answer, he reached for the bandages on his arm. He removed them carefully, and much to her amazement, not a single trace of the horrible injury remained. “See?”

Austrella couldn't believe her eyes. “It's like they were never there.”

He then tore off the bandages on the side of his chest that was left bare unlike the other that was covered by his shirt, revealing his flawless skin. Austrella flushed and looked away to his face, not wanting to be caught staring at his bare and breathtaking chest. “See?”

“I can't believe this. You're completely healed.” Her eyes lit up in joy before wrapping her arms around him. She'd never felt so relieved before. “You have no idea how worried I was, and guilty—”

“Ella, don't apologize.” Liven wrapped his arms around her firmly. “This is not your fault.”

“But I feel *so* guilty,” she mumbled against his shoulder, his warmth enveloping her. “Because of everything; I blamed you so awfully for the things you didn't do. I know you didn't kill the king, the queen, or the princess. And I'm sorry I blamed you for that. What made me want to escape was that you overthrew the royal family—which I know you regret now—and that you killed Prince Adam. Choosing you was like I'm disgracing them, like I'm betraying them. But it doesn't feel like that anymore because you deserve a chance.

Everyone does, and I'm sorry that I pushed you away all the times that you asked for a chance."

Liven ran his fingers through her hair. "Ella, a few people were murdered in my attack, but Prince Adam was never one of them."

Austrella pulled away to meet his eyes. "What do you mean?"

"I never killed Prince Adam."

"What?"

"He's still alive. He's here in the palace."

Austrella's breath hooked. For a moment, she could only stare at him with wide eyes and mouth open. Her thoughts were stilled. Shock paralyzed her.

Liven leaned back against the headboard and pulled the shirt over him completely before he drew her closer

He continued, "Father wanted to kill him, but I didn't let him. I couldn't let another life be taken because of me, just like those people who died when I destroyed a part of the castle. I don't know about the others. They surely escaped, and I hope they're alive. I wanted to tell you that he is alive, but Father had told me long ago that this shouldn't be shared with anyone until, well, one day. I wanted the people to know I didn't kill him or the royal family, but Father said it's best if we keep it hidden. I don't know the reason, he wouldn't tell me. But yes, Prince Adam is alive and well taken care of in the dungeons."

Austrella continued gaping at him in utter shock. She couldn't believe this. After all this time believing Adam was dead at the hands of the dark prince, he was alive. In Catsimoor.

Austrella choked on a sob, covering her hands on her mouth to contain it. She must keep it controlled; he didn't know she was his sister. But it was hard to hold herself back.

Her brother was alive! *Liven* kept him alive. And all these years, she spent hating him for something he didn't commit.

"Hey, hey, you okay?" Liven's eyes were filled with concern.

"I-is it true? That he's really... alive?" Austrella asked between her hiccups.

"Yes, love, he is. We'll visit him soon if you wish."

Another sob ripped from her chest, tears streaming down her eyes in unexplainable relief and happiness. Desperation welled up within her to see her brother, to reunite with him.

She still couldn't believe it was true. If it wasn't for Liven touching her face, she would've thought this was a cruel dream. "I-I can't—I can't believe this! I-I thought..."

The grief left her completely, replacing it with infectious joy.

This man, the dark prince, had kept her brother alive.

And as she looked at him now, she realized all the anger she spent her energy on all these years had been wasted. Her eyes welled up in gratitude. She wrapped her arms around him in a tight embrace, suppressing another sob. Though Liven couldn't return the hug with equal tightness, he hugged her back, stroking her hair. He was still in the process of regaining his strength.

"I could never bring myself to kill him, my love. I would never do that, I promise. I wanted to free him, but I couldn't, I'm sorry—"

"But you kept him alive!" she exclaimed, pulling back to face him. Liven began to wipe away her running tears tenderly. "Thank you." Her chin wobbled.

He was slightly baffled at her words. "What for?"

"For not killing him, even when your father wanted it. For keeping him alive!"

"There's no need to thank me when he's in the dungeons because of me."

It didn't matter *where* Adam was, all that mattered was that he was alive. "But he's alive! You saved his life..."

Her thoughts wandered far, wondering what would be Adam's reaction when he saw her, and what would be her entire family's reaction when they heard he was alive. Would her uncle stop planning to kill Liven if they realized the truth?

Liven caressed her wrist and Austrella was pulled out of her thoughts.

"You sound like you really care about the previous royal family," Liven said. "We can visit him soon."

A great urge formed in her to tell him a thousand thank yous, but being too overwhelmed, she could only nod.

"Taking the throne was never my intention," Liven said, the light on his face slowly fading. "What happened to the people who were killed in my attack was my fault, but the throne being usurped and the royals being overthrown were the fault of King Truficas."

Austrella stared at his face in shock. How come this was her *father's* fault? "What?"

"I had three older brothers, Ella. And they planned on confronting the king about—I will tell you the reason afterward. This thing, I was against it from the first, because I was sure it wouldn't end in peace. They wanted me to join them because I was the only one born with powers. But I refused. One day, I woke up to find them missing and King Truficas sent the guards to us right away, to capture us as well and I heard the news that the king had captured them. But using my powers, Father and I escaped and went into hiding.

"We planned on leaving Alentia, where we lived, far away, but we could not leave my brothers in Catsimoor. We had two of our friends working in Duke Travis' house and with their help, we sneaked into the palace, into the dungeons to free them and flee far away. But..." He clenched his jaw, a darkness sweeping into his eyes. "But we were caught by a guard who, rather happily, informed us that the king had executed my brothers in the morning."

A horrified, loud gasp broke out from Austrella.

Had her father killed Liven's brothers? Was he the cruel murderer that she'd first believed Liven to be? Too horrified, she couldn't speak or breathe.

Liven's features were tightened as if controlling his anger. His hold on her hand tightened, eyes gleaming with tears as he looked into hers. "He killed my brothers, Ella, he executed them. Beheaded them!" The darkness in his eyes became intense. "No one should've killed my brothers but me! But King Truficas did it."

In shock and horror, her tears rolled down, her mouth agape.

"And that's why I attacked! I couldn't control my grief and my anger, and that led me to do what I did. What else could have made a fifteen-year-old boy do such a horrendous thing?"

"Fifteen?" Austrella gasped in shock. Then she realized she hadn't calculated his age before. "That's right... you were only... fifteen."

Liven continued, with a sharp edge in his voice. "I half destroyed the castle. It was like I lost my humanity until I realized my attack had taken lives. I was so... so angry that I could've exact my revenge on the king by killing his son, but I didn't. I just couldn't be like the evil person who murdered my brothers. So I refused to kill him. He was my age, after all."

Was this really the man whom people called as the dark prince? Whoever died at the attack, it was unintentional; he'd refused to become a purposeful murderer.

What Austrella couldn't believe was that, the person responsible for all that happened was her own father. It was indeed unbelievable for her, but that was how truth always was. The Truficas she knew was a loving father and a husband, and she couldn't even think of her father being a merciless person.

But how could she ever deny the truth, as cruel as it was? She would've defended her father to no ends and stubbornly refuse to believe it if she had not trusted Liven. But she had trusted Liven, and she knew he wasn't lying. She could see the honesty in his ocean eyes and could hear it in his each word.

"If I tell you that I invaded the kingdom, it's a lie, because the word '*invade*' hides all the truth. I never invaded the kingdom. There is a whole backstory to why my brothers went to the king."

A chill crawled up Austrella's spine as her eyes dropped from him, her head a war of thoughts. Tears of guilt filled her eyes when she met his eyes again.

"I misjudged you. I cruelly... misjudged you, I hated you for something you didn't do, and I misunderstood you, and accused you of everything we thought you did... all while you didn't do any of them. You are the one who lost more and I can't... I can't believe how cruel—"

"You were never cruel, my love," Liven interrupted, his eyes softening. "You just didn't know. Just like everyone else. But..." He sat straighter, his hand reaching towards her face. "Even when you didn't know my past, when you didn't know any of this, you did something that no one on earth would have. You chose me. You chose me even when you believed I was the dark prince. You chose to give me a chance when you believed I had killed the prince. And that is the most beautiful thing someone has done for me."

How could her heart possibly break when it was already *completely* broken for him? Because it just did now.

Liven wiped away the tears that kept rolling down her cheeks. He leaned forward and kissed her cheek, enfolding her in warmth. "You're nothing like the other people, and that's what makes you so beautiful."

Unable to utter a word, she squeezed his hand tightly. No one had ever said something so heartfelt to her, and that was what was so different about him. He

made her feel like no one else had.

Austrella couldn't stop thinking about her father's act. It seemed like the world itself had shifted at that truth.

Nothing was Liven's fault, but her father's. The guilt she experienced was sharp; she had spent her life hating an innocent boy who lost his brothers because of *her* father, a boy who showed mercy to her brother and kept him alive even when he could've killed him as revenge on her father.

But he hadn't, and Austrella realized why she had felt the Creator telling her to choose him.

"Oh, Liven." She closed her eyes as he caressed her face. "Why didn't you tell me this before? You're not a dark prince; you're not what people and the world believe you are."

"I haven't told this to anyone in ten years, until now. You are the only one my heart wants to be opened to. Father promised to tell people the truth one day with the proof, but not soon. He said he has a good reason. Since then, it has been sealed within me, hardening my heart. But I didn't want to hide it from you; I wanted you to see the truth of my past."

"I have no idea what I would've done if I was in your place. To lose three siblings to execution..." She shuddered in terror. "I'm so—"

Liven pressed his index finger to her lips, silencing her, melting away the coldness. He traced her lips slowly, making her breath hush and forget the terror. "Don't ever apologize, hmm?"

His voice was suddenly husky, making her pulse quicken.

"A-are you feeling completely better now?" she mumbled against his finger that lingered on her lips. She barely held herself back from kissing it.

A smile painted his features, easing the worries. "I feel free now." He lifted their clasped hands to his chest, pressing them against it. "You make me feel free. Like, the past doesn't haunt me anymore."

"You don't feel any bit of pain or tiredness? You must be starving, right? I'll ask—"

"I'm starving for you. I just want to hold you. Let me hold you." He pulled her into his arms desperately, wrapping his arms around her tightly as if he would never let her go. Her heart raced erratically as she wrapped her arms

around him and rested her head on his chest. He rested his chin on her hair, warmth radiating from their embrace. "I feel perfectly fine now."

"Who was the enchanter that cursed you?"

"I don't know." His fingers didn't stay still, they kept stroking her hair. "I've never seen him after that fateful day. I do believe he's from somewhere here. He appeared out of nowhere that night. I didn't realize it was a curse then. After he cast his magic on me, everything I did backfired. It almost destroyed me. I didn't know what was wrong, and we called several enchanters my father knew to figure out my problem. But they couldn't. Then we traveled far away to a friend of my father's, a powerful enchanter who had the ability to read curses. He read mine, and that was when I realized I was cursed."

"Is there any way we can break it?"

"Yes. He said there's a way."

Hope sparked in her as she asked, "What is it?"

"He said, if I find the most powerful thing, my curse will break."

"Oh!" Her head shot up from his chest to meet his eyes. "So, *that's* why you asked me about the most powerful thing some days ago?"

He nodded with a teasing smile, seeming to remember the same event that played in her mind.

"Oh, I'm so sorry! Hate is the least powerful thing, I swear."

Liven chuckled before bending down to kiss her hair. "Of course, I know that."

Austrella nuzzled against his chest with an endless smile. As they sat there, wrapped in each other's warmth, she couldn't help but feel an overwhelming sense of love and contentment.

"So, will you tell me the backstory of your brothers?" she asked, looking up at him with big, eager eyes.

Liven smiled down at her, his fingers tracing patterns on her back. "Should I shock you more than I already have?" he teased.

Austrella rolled her eyes playfully, her heart fluttering with anticipation to learn that it was going to be another shock. "I think I can handle one more shock today."

His lips twitched up. "Certain?"

"Positive."

CHAPTER 14 | UNVEILED

“So, almost five generations ago, King Gabe ruled Catsimoor. Have you heard about him?”

Austrella felt Liven’s gaze seep down to her and her cheeks flushed in embarrassment. She might be a princess, but she didn’t know the history of her ancestors, nor did she have a chance to learn. “I have no idea about this King Gabe. But, oh, I do know about King Julian.”

Her eyes twinkled mischievously; it was none but her grandfather.

Liven snorted in amusement. “He was King Truficas’ father, not someone from five generations ago. Unless he’s immortal, that is.” He returned to the story. “So, King Gabe’s birth was like a miracle to his parents since they had him in their mid-age. His father was past his age to remain the king, so he stepped down and Gabe rose to the throne—”

“As soon as he was born?” Austrella interrupted, her eyes growing wide.

“Seriously, Princess?” Liven’s chest shook as he laughed. “But that does give me the picture of a baby with a crown, sitting on a throne. And oh, not to mention, making judgments in baby language.”

She burst into laughter. “Oh, I would have loved to see it,” she teased. “Anyway, tell me.”

“So, the royal family had this tradition of marrying the royals from other kingdoms to keep their royal blood purely in the royal line and of course, for stronger alliances. His parents, therefore, arranged him a marriage with the princess of Golven. However, King Gabe fell in love with a Catsimooran commoner and wanted to break the arrangement. But his parents refused, because—”

“They wanted to keep their bloodline pure.” Austrella knew the tradition. Her father had broken it for her mother, who was also a commoner.

“Yes, quite right. Even though he was King, he couldn’t do everything he wished, as the court, his parents, and the people pushed him into marrying the princess for all the beneficial political reasons. But King Gabe didn’t bend. He married his sweetheart in secret and decided to reveal it to his parents and the court later, so they couldn’t be separated. However, Alentia announced a war with Catsimoor, and King Gabe’s plans didn’t work out as planned. Revealing his marriage had to wait until the war was over. The war was sudden, and Catsimoor won, yes, but King Gabe died in the war—”

“Died?” Austrella barely withheld her gasp, her head shooting up from his chest to meet his eyes. “B-but why would a king go to the war? I mean, yes they do, but I’ve heard Catsimooran Kings don’t.”

“King Gabe was young, perhaps he was crazy? Anyway, he went to the war, thinking he could do it, and though they won, he died. But after he died, his wife realized she was with his child and confronted his parents. They were shocked, yes, but they didn’t accept her or the baby. They considered them a disgrace. The woman was threatened and sent away from Catsimoor. I’d rather say, they banished her.”

“That’s awful.”

“I know. Since the king was dead and he had no heir or sibling, the court chose King Gabe’s best friend Everard as the new king. He was somewhat next in line to the throne since King Gabe’s father was an only child too, and they didn’t have anyone else they *wanted* to be the next king except him.

“Everard was close to Gabe’s parents; they trusted him and told him about the woman and the child. Even though Everard was Gabe’s best friend and more like a brother, he shared the same belief as Gabe’s parents, calling it a disgrace.”

Austrella had heard from her mother a hundred times that she had thought the royals treated commoners as less until she was chosen by the crown prince.

“And what happened to the woman?”

“Well,” he continued. “She gave birth to a son. And years later, on her deathbed, she told him the secret she had been carrying all her life, that he’s the son of late King Gabe and the rightful heir to the throne. That secret was passed down to the Catsimoor family—”

“Catsimoor family?” Austrella had a faded memory of her father saying the name once, though not to her, but to her mother.

Liven nodded. "The original royal family. King Gabe's line. Our kingdom was named after the first king's last name, and King Gabe was from his lineage. Therefore, King Gabe's line is the original royal line, not Everard's. People don't know about this because the woman was threatened to secrecy, and her generation followed it for their safety. So, for their safety, their family name was known—"

"Oh, wait, wait, wait!" Austrella waved her hands in a motion to calm herself and shifted her position to his front to face him. "So you're saying... this Everard... It was *his* generation that continued as the royal line?"

He nodded again. "King Truficas is from Everard's line, of course," he said, as if reading her thoughts.

So was she not an original princess? Was her father not the rightful king? She couldn't believe it.

He continued at her silence, "The Catsimoor family was silent with the secret, fearing that the ruling royals would finish them off, until certain three brothers of the current generation determinedly planned to confront the king about it. The fourth brother believed it was such a—"

Austrella gasped in horrendous realization, her hands clasping over her mouth. "You? A-and your brothers? *You're* the Catsimoor family?"

Liven pulled her hands off her mouth and clasped them in his as he nodded. "Yes. My brothers didn't truly set off for the *throne*; it was impossible King Truficas would hand it over. They just wanted our family to be part of the court, or at least to tell people the truth. *That's* why they went. But..." He trailed off with a sharp sigh.

For a moment, Austrella could only stare at him in shock. Thoughts spun inside her head like leaves in the wind, her head a mess. "So, since your brothers are gone... you are the rightful heir to the throne?" she asked in disbelief.

She couldn't believe that the dark prince she believed had invaded Catsimoor never invaded it; he had only claimed back what was rightfully his.

Liven nodded. "I am," he admitted. "That's why I told you, the word *invade* hides the truth."

Austrella gaped at him, the realization sinking in more and more that she was not an original royal.

"I-I can't believe this... I have never heard about such a thing." She tried recalling when she had heard her father mentioning the Catsimoor family, but she hadn't paid attention then, so she didn't remember anything more.

"It's the secret of the royal family. King Everard had it recorded in his diary; it was passed down to each king in the lineage. I found the diary and I have it. I can show you if you don't believe me."

Austrella softened her gaze and squeezed his hands. "I believe you, Liven, I really do," she assured him. "It's just... it's just seems so hard to... process all of this. But... why didn't you tell the people then? They all believe that you invaded our kingdom, and think of you unjustly."

Liven dropped his gaze. "My past was always sealed, Ella. I never shared anything with anyone, not even this, even if it was meant to be announced. Father said he would tell the people about everything one day and clear my name, but not until he stepped down. I don't know why, but he has a reason. Many people accused me of killing the royal family, but Father told me to have patience, claiming he has a plan, which I have no idea about. All the accusations hardened my heart. Until... until I met you. Strangely, I couldn't bear you accusing me, and like I've never did before, I defended myself and told you I didn't. I couldn't... I can't hide myself from you, Ella. And I will never hide."

His fingers grazed hers. This was a lot to take in and difficult for her head to process.

First, he was not a dark prince.

Second, her father executed his brothers, which led him to attack the castle.

Third, Liven showed mercy to his enemy's son and spared his life even after his enemy killed his three brothers.

Fourth, he never invaded the throne; he was the rightful heir.

And fifth...

Her eyes traveled up to his with a soaring heart.

Fifth, he shared his past with her, something he hadn't told anyone in ten years.

Liven continued softly, "You know, losing my brothers hardened my heart for all these years. It felt like my heart was full of holes, with missing pieces. I was cold, my real self was long forgotten until... until the most beautiful woman I met in the maze put sense to my head." He smiled with a glint in his eyes.

Soothing tenderness enfolded her like a warm blanket and her eyes held a watery glimmer as she stared at her prince. A smile curved her lips.

She loved him. She loved the man she met in the maze, who found it quite interesting to make her wait for his name.

Austrella's heart twisted with guilt suddenly; he had opened himself to her and confessed not to hide anymore, but she still held her secret sealed.

Austrella couldn't restrain herself anymore.

He loved her and she loved him; there would be no lies between them.

She took a deep breath, her heart racing as she prepared herself to reveal her deepest secret. "Liven?" she called him softly.

He leaned in, cradling her chin. "Yes?"

"There's something... something important I need to tell you."

Liven replied in a gentle and encouraging tone, "Tell me."

Her chest heaved heavily as she tried to gain the courage to tell him something that would shock him beyond the shock he had given her. A tingle of fear settled in her stomach, fearing his reaction. But she needed to do this because she could no longer hide from or lie to him.

Overall, she trusted him.

"I don't want to hide from you anymore. I want to tell you who I am, but I... I'm just a little scared?" she said uncertainly.

Liven leaned closer with concern etched on his face. "What are you scared of?"

Austrella stole a glance at their clasping hands before meeting his ocean eyes. Tension settled upon her shoulders. Tears glistened in her eyes as she confessed, "I don't want to lose you... What if this... this changes everything? What if you'd stop loving me?"

His eyes grew wide, shocked by her fear. "Are you serious? Ella, don't be stupid," he admonished her with eyebrows furrowed. "Nothing can ever take away my love for you. I promise you that."

"It's just... what I'm going to tell you will shock you extremely, but it will also explain why I had been so rebellious with you." She ended up biting her lips in lingering hesitancy. She wanted nothing wrong occurring between them, not even a small gap.

"Don't be afraid, you can tell me." He intertwined their fingers locked like a reassurance.

Austrella closed her eyes and took several steady, deep breaths. Then she flung her eyes open, meeting his eager ones.

"I'm Princess Austrella."

Liven's eyes widened, staring at her in disbelief as she dropped the bombshell; her true identity.

"What?" Shock filled his whisper.

She nodded fearfully. Her fingers had started to shake. "I'm her. I'm Austrella," she confirmed with a quiver in her voice. "Rella Austen doesn't exist. It was just a fake name to conceal my identity for my safety. I returned nearly two months ago after ten long years of hiding, just to live in Catsimoor, and I worked at the duke's without revealing myself. No one knew about me. That's when I heard about the ball, and it was my chance to see the place I grew up in. And that's why I attended... That's why I was so rebellious with you, because I believed you killed my brother. But you... you disarmed me when I tried to block you, and I couldn't resist what I felt. That's why I ran away."

As she made her hasty explanations, Liven listened with his jaw dropped, completely dumbfounded. She wished to know what was going through his mind, but she couldn't read through his shock. His eyes soon became unreadable. His expression caused a tendril of fear to wrap around her heart.

"Is this true?" His hand dropped from her face.

Her heart sank. "Why—"

"I do believe you, Ella," he cut off hastily. "I do, but I can't... I just can't believe this." Disbelief crammed in his ocean eyes.

Tears burned in her eyes, her heart sinking even more. "It's bad, isn't it?" Her voice trembled.

Liven blinked, a rush of emotions flooding his face suddenly. "What?"

Austrella attempted to hold back her tears as she confessed, assuming her fears coming true. "I'm your enemy's daughter, and you now hate me, don't you?"

If he hated her, she didn't know how she could ever live with herself.

Liven's shock deepened before a sudden sternness crossed his face, sharpening his every feature. His face drew close to her, his fingers holding her chin. "Did I say that?" he asked seriously.

“No...”

“I’m shocked, Ella, I’m just shocked. Just like you were. I just couldn’t believe it. But *hate* you?” His firm words were dipped in disbelief. “Hate you because you revealed your identity? Because you don’t want to hide from me? Hate you because you’re *Austrella*? Ella, I don’t care! My love for you is not something that would change just because you’re Truficas’ daughter. Whatever he did was his fault; it doesn’t affect you. Why did you think I would hate you because you’re Princess *Austrella* anyway?”

A tear rolled down her eye and he wiped it away, almost immediately. “I-I don’t know...”

“Ella,” he whispered, his voice a gentle cadence. Liven pressed his forehead against her, his hands holding her face and looking deep into her eyes as if peering into her soul. “Nothing matters to me, because no matter what, you’re *my* Ella, the angel I met in the maze. You...” He paused, his eyes roaming around her face before looking into her eyes. “You are the woman I love.”

Tears streamed down her eyes, and her heart pounded in the purest joy she’d ever felt. “You love me?”

“Yes,” Liven said firmly, his eyes now a whirlpool of emotions. “Whether you believe it or not, I do.” He closed the distance between them and kissed her fiercely, his lips devouring hers in fervor, his fingers leaving heated strokes on her hair.

Austrella kissed him back immediately, her fingers curling around his collar. A swell of emotions overcame her the moment he kissed her. His warmth embraced her, setting her on fire, and the heated placement of his hand on her face fluttered her heart. Her fingers ran up to his hair and she curled them around it. She was empowered with such feelings that only he could give her. Liven pulled her closer as he kissed her harder, lifting her from the bed onto his lap, his strong arms wrapping around her as if he had no intention of letting go.

A knock on the door startled them, and they pulled away, their breaths ragged. They held each other as Liven rested his forehead against hers, making her eyes flutter close.

Another knock followed, a male voice calling out, “Your Highness?”

Austrella was about to climb off his lap but he didn’t let her as he turned to the door and answered, “What is it?”

“His Majesty wants to know if Your Highness has recovered.”

“Oh, yes, tell His Majesty that His Highness is completely and perfectly healed,” Liven replied mischievously, making Austrella’s eyes flutter open to find his eyes gleaming. She smiled, mirroring his.

“O-oh, of course. Of course. Very pleased to know that. And, Your Highness, lunch is served and His Majesty is waiting for you.”

“Thank you. We will be there soon.”

Liven turned to her, drawing their faces closer again as he threaded his fingers through her hair. All these feelings were the most intense and beautiful Austrella had ever felt. It gave her a thrill like no other, ignited a passionate fire, a fierce one, and it told her she belonged here in his arms.

That she belonged with him.

Right then and there, Austrella made a silent, determined promise.

She would never let go of him.

That night, King Leopold embarked on a journey somewhere, claiming to receive an important letter, refusing to disclose any more information to Liven than saying, “You just have to trust me, Son.”

Liven didn’t press him. After he left, Liven took Austrella to visit Adam as he had promised her. He said it was safer when his father wasn’t present.

Austrella’s stomach churned with unease as Liven guided her to the dungeons. She inched closer to him for comfort. As if sensing her discomfort, he wrapped an arm around her waist.

Though the torches on the stonewall lit their way, the dungeons had a dark air about it that was hard to ignore. The light didn’t seem enough to light up the whole space. The passageways were narrow, and the air was cold.

Was this where Adam lived?

Nevertheless, it didn’t matter. All that mattered was that he was alive.

Liven guided Austrella down a separate dungeon passage, away from the other cells, explaining that Adam was held in a more secure, well-lit cell on the other side of the dungeons. As they ventured deep, the narrow path expanded into a well-lit space, eventually leading towards a single, large cell at the end.

Four stern-looking guards were stationed outside Adam’s cell. At Liven’s meaningful nod, they left, and Austrella’s feet carried her near the cell gate.

The cell was bigger, and overall, lit with more than two torchlights, unlike the others they had passed. Her pace slackened when she glimpsed inside through the iron gate railings. Piles of stacked books occupied most of the place, making it look more like a library than a cell.

In the corner was a bed, and her breath hooked when she saw a man lying on it, engrossed in a book. She could only see half of his face, yet she declared he was a hundred times more unrecognizable than she was; he'd grown a beard.

Austrella felt a whirlwind of emotions. She was utterly relieved he was alive, saddened by the years of believing he was dead and living apart, overjoyed to see him, and eager to reunite.

Tears pricked her eyes and she turned her gaze to Liven who leaned against the wall next to the gate, out of Adam's sight.

She shot him a watery smile before turning to her brother who looked more like a stranger now. She neared the bars and curled her fingers around them. Restraining her emotions, she asked softly, "What are you reading?"

The book Adam held above him fell onto his face, as he was startled by her voice, and he quickly turned in her direction. He sat upright. When their eyes met, her heart clenched.

"Oh, and who is this? A new guard of mine?" he asked, a surprised smile cracking on his face.

Austrella's heart ached as he didn't recognize her, not that she expected him to. She wouldn't have recognized him either, had not she been foretold this was her brother.

Adam's thick beard made him look older than someone his age, and he looked a little like their father, far unrecognizable from the young boy she had always envisioned. He was healthy and not dull with hopelessness like she had expected him to look; his eyes still held the same light after all these years.

Same with his wits.

Austrella blinked to fight back her tears. A painful smile stretched on her lips. "Do I look like a guard?"

Adam rose to his feet, laughing and dropping the book to the bed. "A guard I can easily convince to free me, of course."

His light mood even in a prison cell fluttered her heart as much as it broke her. "It's interesting that you have a lot of books here," she commented.

“Ah, yes, I do. They keep me alive, take me far away from this cell, and give me great adventures. Thanks to Prince Liven, though.”

Austrella’s eyes widened in surprise and she looked aside at Liven, her lips parted. Liven smiled and nodded in confirmation.

“How did you come to be here?” Adam asked, slowly walking to the gate. “If I know my guards any better, they don’t let anyone through.”

Austrella shrugged. “Prince Liven allowed me.”

His eyes widened in surprise. “Oh, how kind and *confusing* of him. Don’t get me wrong, but I’ve never had a visitor other than Prince Liven himself, so it is indeed a surprise to see you. What brings you here anyway?”

“I came to see you.” Austrella’s hold on her tears began to waver. “I’m Ella, Adam. Ella. Do you remember me?”

Adam’s eyebrows knitted together, his steps halting a short distance from the gate. “Ella?” Something flashed across his face. “I apologize, but I do not know you. I don’t know any Ella other than...” He trailed off.

“We used to be best friends.”

“Best friends?” Adam repeated, his eyebrows shooting up, confused. “I apologize, but I do not understand you...”

Swallowing the hardness from her throat, Austrella forced her words. “Remember when you pushed Duke Valson’s son into a river because you didn’t like him? His father and Uncle Travis pulled him out, and no one found out that you were responsible for it. You didn’t tell anyone other than me, because such an act wasn’t suitable for a crown prince. It was your biggest secret then, and you shared it only with me.”

Adam stared at her, sheer confusion etching across his features. “Who... who are you?” he asked suspiciously. “I haven’t told about it to anyone other than my...” He trailed off again, seemingly avoiding any mention of Austrella.

So Austrella filled in for him, her voice wavering. “Than your sister?”

Adam’s eyes tightened briefly. He attempted to speak, but closed his mouth and remained silent, his gaze scrutinizing her.

“Yes, only your sister knew your secret. Do you know that she fled the kingdom ten years ago with her parents, and lived all these years thinking you were dead? That she lost you forever?”

Adam’s lips parted.

“But after ten long years, she returned to Catsimoor, worked in her uncle’s manor as his servant and hid her identity for her safety, and yes, no one could recognize her, not even her own brother.”

Adam’s expression twisted into disbelief and he took a hurried step forward. “S-she’s here? She’s in Catsimoor?” His eyes widened with shock and... desperation that broke her heart.

A tear slipped free and her fingers tightened around the bars. “Yes, Adam. *I* am here.”

His eyes widened like saucers in perplexed intensity. He gaped at her in incredulity, unable to speak.

“Adam, it’s me. I’m Austrella.”

He blinked several times, his features shifting through a range of expressions before he rushed to the bars and held onto them tightly, looking into her tearful eyes closely, as if searching.

“Austrella?” he asked desperately. “I-is that really you?”

They were standing so close, with only the iron bars separating them. She nodded hurriedly, tears flowing now freely. “Yes, it’s me. It’s really me.”

Adam’s disbelief was palpable, his eyes remained wide as his hands closed on hers. The touch from her brother burst her heart with joy. “But how? How are you here? I thought... I thought I would never see you again... and you... you look so different.”

“It’s a long story. I promise I will tell you everything but... oh Adam... I thought... All these years I thought you were dead! Until today... it changed everything... and I can’t believe it’s really you.” She reached out to touch her brother’s face through the cell bars. “You have no idea how much I missed you.”

His eyes scanned her face as if searching desperately in disbelief. “I-I can’t believe it’s you,” he said, his shaking hand reaching towards her face in incredulity. “I had no hope of seeing you again.” His eyes filled with tears. “You look... you’re grown... so grown. How come my baby girl is a woman now? Look at you... you’re *so* changed.”

“And so are you,” Austrella choked with a flurry of emotions. “You are *utterly* changed! And you have a beard.” A watery laugh broke out from her and he chuckled. “You look so different that I can barely believe this.” She shook her head in disbelief and wished the bars would vanish.

"I can't believe either. I can hardly recognize you."

"But don't you recognize my eyes? You've said a million times that I had your eyes."

"Of course..." Adam began and trailed off as his gaze moved to her side.

Liven stepped into view, fishing a key from his pocket. "Here."

Austrella turned to him and they exchanged soft smiles. *Oh, this man!* How could she thank him enough for all of this?

"Wait, *you*?" Adam's eyes grew wide as he saw Liven. "You allowed her, yes, but you *brought* her here?" He turned his gaze to Austrella swiftly. "Does he..." He paused, silently seeking an answer.

Austrella understood his unspoken question and nodded, her smile wide. "He knows everything. He's the one who told me you're alive."

Adam shook his head at Liven incredulously. "I know you are kind, but I didn't know you were *actually* kind."

Liven smirked at Adam's reaction. "Oh and, did you hear? Your sister is my bride."

Adam was completely taken aback now. He stumbled over his words. "What? Bride? Wait, I did hear—wait, *you* are the bride?"

His gaze snapped to Austrella. She blushed and nodded.

Liven moved closer to the cell gate and with a deliberate twist of the key, he unlocked and pushed it open. Austrella rushed to her brother, throwing her arms around him.

Adam hugged her back tightly. Her sobs broke out, muffled by his shoulder. Adam kept stroking her hair in disbelief and they stood in a silent embrace for a long moment, cherishing their reunion.

"I missed you so much, little pumpkin," he confessed after an immeasurable of silence, his voice wavering with emotions.

Austrella laughed at the old nickname; she used to hate it when she was little, but since their separation, she had longed to hear him call her that again. "Not much as I missed you, big apple."

Adam barked a laugh; it was her nickname for him that she used whenever she was furious with him. Now that she was happy, she couldn't resist calling him that.

Austrella hugged Liven's arm as they made their way back from the dungeons. This day had turned out to be one of the best days of her life, with so many twists that shifted her world, starting from the moment Liven woke up to her.

They crossed paths with a few servants and Austrella bid each one of them goodnight. Liven followed suit. At their shocked faces and stuttering responses, she threw him a knowing smirk.

"This day changed quite a few things, didn't it?" he asked as they reached her door. He opened the door for her like a true gentleman and followed her inside. "First, I can sleep well knowing you won't try to escape anymore."

Austrella thought he was teasing until she turned around and caught his genuine smile. She felt a pang of guilt. "I ruined your nights, didn't I?"

"What? No." Liven strode towards her, his smile vanishing. "I won't call it *ruined*. Those nights had me worried *because* I care about you." He cradled her face and she loved it so much that she thought she would melt like snow. "Because I want you."

She sighed softly. "I can't believe people call you the dark prince."

He pressed his lips together before nodding. "I can't believe it either. Because I am *Mr. I Will Reveal My Name After The Ball*." A smile pulled up the corner of his mouth.

Austrella laughed and tears crammed in her eyes at the beautiful memory.

"Hey." He leaned down, watching her closely. "You are Austrella," he whispered in wonder as if the shock lingered.

"And you're not a dark prince."

Liven chuckled. "Anyway, I remember you promising me a dance when I'd wake up, a private ball for just the two of us—when you tried to distract me. So, are you still keeping your word, Princess?"

A smile blossomed on her face. "Of course. How can I ever break a promise to a charming prince?"

He smirked, raising his eyebrows. "Then it's settled. But for now, we both need a deep rest, especially you, my love." He touched the tip of her nose, making her blush. "So, goodnight." He leaned in and placed a long kiss on her forehead.

Austrella's heart swelled. She loved the feeling of it and she wished he would never stop kissing her. She wanted that kiss again, anywhere; it set her on fire.

“Goodnight,” she said hesitantly.

Liven’s smile was enchanting before he turned to leave. Disappointment sank into her stomach as she watched him leave. She wanted that kiss at least once more before going to bed; it made her feel... so loved. Just like every other times he’d kissed her.

She stood there, biting her lip and scratching her head as she glanced at her bed.

“Is everything alright?”

Her heart gave a leap at Liven’s voice. She turned to find him at the door, holding the doorknob.

“Um...” She shrugged nervously. “I-I don’t know. I mean, yes but I just don’t feel like I want to sleep now.”

“But you said you’re terribly exhausted. You need a rest. Besides, tomorrow is going to be a long day.”

“Is it?”

Liven’s grip dropped from the knob as he walked back to her with a smirk. “Of course, it is. Because you, my love, spent the last few days trying to get away from me, and from today on, you’re going to spend *all* your time with me. So, you better get a long sleep.”

Her heart began pounding as each step brought him closer to her. “I will. It’s just...” She trailed off, glancing around with a shrug.

Liven approached her, and much to her heart’s swelling, he cupped her face again, his eyes so gentle that she didn’t want to look anywhere but him, forever. “What’s bothering you? Tell me.”

Austrella stared at him for a moment, and then she said, “Thank you.”

He pressed his forehead against hers. “I’ll do anything for you, and I won’t welcome a *thank you* for that.”

A smile, dipped in love, caressed her lips. “I know.”

“Good. Now, get some serious sleep. Goodnight.” He kissed her forehead gently, his lips lingering there for a moment, and she couldn’t help her smile from blooming.

Flashing a smile, he walked away. But she wanted his kiss again and again.

“Liven?”

Liven turned back. “Yes?”

"I didn't get a chance to thank you for saving me."

A faint smile rose on his face and he strode back to her. *Again.*

His eyes were filled with an undeniable gentleness. "I don't know what I would've done if I was a second later." He tucked a lock of hair behind her ear before stroking it. "But I thank the Creator for not letting that happen. Look at me." He cupped her chin with the other hand. "No one will hurt you as long as I'm alive."

Her heart had a movement at his promise. Austrella stared at him with tears shimmering in her eyes. "And thank you for keeping my brother alive, thank you for accepting me even after you realized—"

"Ella." His tongue caressed her name, and he leaned closer, his ocean eyes intense. *"I love you."*

His words were everything.

Those beautiful words were all that she needed to hear. He enfolded her in warmth. Breathless, she was lost in the depths of her favorite ocean for a moment as they locked gazes.

Then slowly, he leaned in and placed a tender kiss on her forehead. Again. He pulled away, only to kiss her forehead once more. "Goodnight, Ella."

"Goodnight, Liven."

Austrella fixed her eyes on him until he closed the door behind him. A long breath escaped her lungs and she sat on her bed with a smile. She was lost in thoughts of how she loved him more and more with each breath.

She sat there, remaining lost in thoughts until she caught the door open slightly. She threw herself to the bed immediately, like a child about to be caught awake by a parent.

"Not in bed yet?" Liven asked amusedly, poking his head through the gap.

Austrella blew out the candle before pulling up the cover. "I am asleep!"

"People don't talk while they're sleeping."

"Well, I'm sleep talking."

"Then I guess I'm sleep standing."

They shared a hearty laugh.

"I just wanted to make sure you're in bed," he confessed.

"Don't worry, I won't run away," she promised.

Austrella *heard* his charming smile as he said, “I won’t let you run away anyway, my rebellious princess.”

CHAPTER 15 | DANCE

Snowflakes danced around her, some landing softly on her lashes and some on hair.

Austrella strolled through the palace garden to enjoy the serene winter beauty. Though she had been tired of coldness in the Westlock woods, where warm days were rare, the beauty of the snow in Catsimoor was different and pleasant. The garden appeared like an enchanting winter wonderland, the ground blanketed in a thick layer of snow.

She had visited Adam in the morning with Liven, but since no one—the guards—must suspect them, the visit was brief, but it was enough for her. She was just happy that Adam was alive and alright.

Something soft crashed on the back of Austrella's head, startling her. She whirled around to find Liven standing a short distance away, clad in a winter jacket, with a playful smirk on his lips.

"I apologize, that was an accident!" he called out, yet in his hands, he held another handful of snow, shaping it into a snowball.

"You!" She narrowed her eyes playfully as she bent down to scoop up some snow for her revenge. Though, before she could launch her snowy attack, Liven threw another snowball at her.

"Oops, sorry! Another accident!"

Austrella let out a squeal in surprise as the snowball landed on her, dusting her with a spray of snowflakes. "I won't forgive you for this!" She gathered snow in her hand and flung it back at him, but it missed the target as he moved out of its way.

"Is that all you've got, my love?" Liven teased, bending to scoop up more snow.

Challenge accepted, she was faster than he was and aimed her handful of snow at him. It hit him in the face and he ducked away with laughter.

“Oh, you’re in for it now!” Her voice shook with laughter.

Austrella continued to throw icy balls at him, swiftly and relentlessly, not giving him a chance to fight back but laugh helplessly. However, Liven retaliated with a sudden but forceful splash of snow that caught her by surprise, enveloping her completely with the snow.

“Liven!” she cried, startled, followed by a laugh. She gathered her now-snowy gown and sprinted away.

“You can’t run away from me, snow princess!” Liven pursued her, his laughter matching hers.

Laughing and running made her knees go weak, a signal of her defeat that she didn’t want to accept. She glanced back to see Liven catching up and tried to quicken her pace. But the snowy ground made it even more difficult.

Suddenly, two strong arms caught her waist and lifted her off the ground. Austrella let out a surprised squeak as his arms encircled her and spun her around. “The victory is mine,” he declared. Her laughter was unabated as he shifted his hold on her and carried her in a bridal style.

“Put me down, you rascal!” Austrella protested, her hands pushing against his chest.

Liven chuckled, his breaths coming out in small puffs. “Sorry, snow princess, but I don’t take orders from a *rebellious* princess.” He smirked, holding her securely in his arms.

She couldn’t stop laughing. “Let me down!” Austrella exclaimed, struggling within his grip. She nearly slipped out of his arms, but he quickly caught her, holding her tighter.

Liven smiled at her persistence. “I am so sorry, my love, but I’m not going to let you go.” He surely was enjoying this as much as she was.

Then Austrella surrendered. She smiled shyly as she wrapped her arms around his neck. The intimacy made her winter turn into summer.

“You’re lucky I sprinted off,” she said, breathless from the run, laughter, and his proximity. “Because I was about to turn you into a snowman.” She grinned coyly.

“You wouldn’t dare,” Liven said mischievously, staring at her in admiration. It deepened her blush.

“I would, easily would,” Austrella said and blurted out, “But, you see, I’m in your arms, and you’re too distracting.”

“Hmm?” Liven leaned in closer, his voice low and husky. “Am I now?”

Austrella held her breath as their eyes locked. A strong urge to kiss him rose within her. “Maybe...”

“Your Highness!”

Liven turned around with her in his arms and she caught sight of a footman approaching, his ears turning red at their intimate pose. Austrella blushed a deeper shade of red, and without a thought, she buried her face in the crook of Liven’s neck, against the woolen collar.

“H-his Majesty has, um, uh, returned with Raven Hoodhock, a-and His Majesty is seeking your... um, your presence in the drawing room.”

“I will be there shortly.”

As she sensed the footman leave, Austrella lifted her head and saw him disappearing from her line of sight. “Who is Raven?”

Liven turned to her, his eyes filled with warmth. “Raven is a friend. He has been helping us to find the most powerful thing to break my curse.”

“It’s an object?”

He shrugged. “I’m not certain, but it has to be, right? What else could it be? My father has many magical friends—people with abilities, that is—who are helping us to find the most powerful thing for me. None have worked all these years, but we believe there is something out there.”

“I hope you’ll find it soon.”

Liven nodded with a smile before his expression shifted to amusement. He eyed her with a teasing smirk. “Oh, but I didn’t know somewhere deep inside the rebellious you, there is a shy girl.”

Austrella rolled her eyes to hide her blush. “What is it that you called me earlier? Snow Princess? Is that my new nickname?”

His smirk widened. “Oh yes, just one of a hundred,” he said huskily and planted a gentle kiss on her cheek. “Just you wait for the rest of them.”

Austrella walked in through the doors of the private ballroom for the private dance she had promised her prince.

It was not as spacious as the other ballroom, but equally elegant. The chandeliers overhead enveloped the room in a warm, golden light. Before her, a grand staircase descended to the polished, gleaming, golden-like floor.

Her gaze was immediately drawn to the open balcony across the room, and there stood her prince—Liven.

Their eyes met. He was clad in a black elegant suit, in which he appeared impossibly more handsome.

Her breath was stolen and a smile spread across her lips. He was filled with awe and admiration as he beheld her, his face lighting up at the sight of her.

Austrella neared the staircase. Liven walked towards her elegantly from the balcony, his hands behind him, looking every bit the gentleman he was.

Austrella revealed the glass slippers she'd been holding behind her and looked at him, sharing a secretive smile. She placed them on the floor and slipped her feet into them. The magical glow radiated from the slippers, enveloping her.

Her blue gown transformed into the pristine white gown that was always a remarkable sight. The light vanished, the transformation of her gown and hair completed; she glanced down at her glamorous gown. She felt beautiful.

When her gaze lifted to meet Liven's eyes, she was greeted by an expression that left her breathless.

Liven stood there in the center of the room, his lips parted, looking up at her as if she were his entire world. The awe in his eyes made her feel like the most beautiful and cherished person in existence.

A radiant smile claimed her lips as she descended the grand staircase with deliberate grace. Liven watched in awe, his eyes never leaving her.

When Austrella was only two steps from the landing, Liven couldn't seem to contain himself any longer. He stepped forward, still wearing the awed expression.

She reached the last step.

He bowed, holding out his hand to her. Austrella curtsied as she accepted it, struggling to breathe evenly. His lips brushed against her hand as he planted a lingering kiss.

As he rose, their eyes locked in a timeless connection. He drew closer, and he had her hand cradled against his chest. His other hand reached up to a loose strand of her hair and caressed it before running his knuckles along her cheek.

Warmth coursed through her veins.

"You are an absolute angel." His voice, when he finally spoke, was a soft whisper in her ears.

Liven guided her to the center of the dance floor. He intertwined his fingers with hers and placed his other hand on her back, enveloping her in a thrilling warmth.

Austrella placed her hand on his shoulder; their closeness was exhilarating and comforting. His presence was like a protective embrace. His touches sent shivers of delight down her spine, electrifying her senses.

The music began, swirling around them as their bodies moved in rhythm, moving as one. When he spun her around elegantly, her gown twirled around like a cloud of snowflakes. Each of their steps was graceful. Their eyes never moved from each other. She secretly enjoyed the feeling of being weightless in his arms as he lifted her. When he placed her down, they moved to another spin.

As he drew her closer, his lips captured hers fiercely, as if he was unable to hold himself back anymore.

Their dance stopped, though the music continued to swirl around them, and he wrapped his arms around her tightly. She kissed him back; she had been resisting the urge for a long time now. Her fingers found his collar hastily and clung to them.

Liven kissed her with great urgency, his hands becoming restless on her back, and pulled her even closer. Pressed against him, she felt his heartbeat racing faster in harmony with hers as their lips kissed impatiently. Pleasure and heat rippled through her body, and her knees weakened.

Then suddenly, with a thud, the doors flung open and King Leopold's voice cut through the air. "Liven!"

They pulled away from the kiss and turned in unison to see the king above the stairs.

"Franklin is here with something important to discuss with you, and you must come now!" the king demanded, glaring down the stairs at them.

Why did the king really have to come himself to summon Liven? Silently gasping for breath, Austrella tried to step away from Liven's embrace, but he pulled her closer, with no intention of letting her go.

"Don't you see? We're in the middle of something here, and we would appreciate not being disturbed. Whatever it is, it can wait," Liven said firmly.

"This matter cannot wait, Liven. Whatever you are doing can wait, but this cannot. It's urgent, and this information from Franklin is serious."

"No," Liven protested sterner than the king had. "This is our time, and nothing is—"

"This cannot be postponed," the king grew more serious. "Now you must come, for this has utmost importance."

"Only after—"

"Liven," Austrella interrupted him, her eyes turning to him. Liven kept glaring up at his father. She tapped on his chest gently before placing a hand on the side of his face, which made him turn to her. His eyes softened instantly. "Hey, it's alright. You should go and see what it is, if it's that important." He opened his mouth to protest but she beat him to it. "I will wait for you here and we can... *dance*... after whatever you need to do. You should really go."

Liven stared at her for a moment before sighing in defeat. "Fine," he muttered unwillingly. He planted a kiss on her forehead before leaving her side. She watched him ascend the stairs with a clenched jaw, his loud footsteps echoing throughout the room as he stormed out.

The king didn't leave the room after him as she expected, he remained up there, his eyes sternly down on her. She pursed her lips and looked away in discomfort.

"You, Miss Ella," the king demanded her attention.

Her gaze darted upward. "Yes?"

"From now on, you must not enter the eastern wing, as shall no one. You can go anywhere but the east wing; it is forbidden. Do I make myself clear?"

Why had the east wing become forbidden all of a sudden? She wondered, but gave the king a nod before he turned and made his exit.

Sighing, Austrella walked to the balcony that overlooked the palace grounds. The musicians who played the music on an elevated platform, hidden behind a curtain, left the room too, leaving her alone.

The winter air didn't seem cold, as the heat of their kiss lingered within her. Propping her arms on the railing, she leaned against it and hoped whoever had come had the powerful object with them to break Liven's curse. She had heard that the magical object the morning visitor had brought hadn't been the answer.

Maybe the Liven who would return to her would be the one freed from his curse.

Thus, she waited peacefully.

Time ticked by, and when she eventually started to get worried about his return, the sound of footsteps stomping down the stairs reached her ears. She whirled around.

Austrella's eyes found Liven, and a smile rose on her lips, but it was soon replaced with a frown as she saw his face. His eyes were stern, his features were tightened, and his jaw was clenched hard; his face was utterly unreadable. Whatever had happened was not pleasant, Austrella realized.

"What happened?" she asked, moving from the railings as he strode towards her.

Liven didn't answer. He rushed to her and closed the distance between them, his lips crashing onto hers fiercely. He pinned her against the balcony wall, catching her by surprise. Austrella didn't waste a second; she kissed him back, but her urgency failed to match his. He was more urgent than ever before; he kissed her roughly with desire and as if pouring his frustration into it.

He pressed her further against the wall, his hands framing her face. The fierceness of his kisses made her tremble with love. Her legs turned to jelly. She clung to him powerlessly as the kiss deepened. When he finally pulled away, she gasped for breath, their foreheads resting against each other.

She opened her eyes and found his close. His hot breath fanned her face, making her tremble in delight. She cradled his face. "Liven," she called him between the breaths that came out in short gasps. He opened his eyes and they were unreadable. "What happened?"

For a moment, he was silent. He stared at her with a flurry of emotions, desperation being the only one recognizable. He closed the distance again and kissed her ferociously, making her toes curl in pleasure.

Then he pulled away, and before closing in again, he whispered, "All I want is to live with you forever."

CHAPTER 16 | ROSE

Two days had passed since the dance, and Liven still hadn't shared the news of the visitor with her.

She didn't want to force him, so she decided to wait until he was ready. However, she was persistently concerned about him. Whenever he was alone, she found him looking bothered and frustrated; though whenever she joined him, the look vanished.

Austrella walked out of her room, making her way to Liven's study, where he had been occupied since the king left for another journey yesterday.

She had become suspicious about the king's secretive journeys, and Liven admitted his suspicions as well. It had them both watch the king extra careful. However, it provided them with no clues.

There was still no clue about the attackers in the woods either, but the search was still on. Liven promised to deal with Duke Travis carefully, in a way that wouldn't hurt him, which was why he refused to disclose the truth behind the attack to his father who would consider nothing but to execute the duke.

Austrella was pulled from her thoughts when a guard crossed her path. She recognized him as the guard who had helped her escape—Maggie's brother.

"My lady." The guard approached her, pulling out a sealed envelope from his pocket. "I have an important letter from Duke Travis. You must be careful with it. I suggest you burn it after reading."

"You work for the duke?" she asked him quietly, with an edge to her voice.

The guard nodded. "Many of us do, and His Grace has sent me to give you this letter. He says it's important."

Her anger simmered. Knowing what must be in the letter, she snatched it from him. "Go and tell the duke that whatever he's up to, it must be stopped. Prince Liven is not a dark prince, and he has not murdered the royal family. All

actions against him must be stopped. Warn the duke to stop at once or else he will become a dark duke himself.” Though her voice was quiet, her words were sharp and furious, as if the poor guard was her uncle himself.

The guard opened his mouth but shut it and nodded curtly before walking away.

Austrella moved to a quiet corner and broke the seal, opening the letter.

Just as she presumed, the letter was complete rubbish that infuriated her.

Dear Ella,

I heard that you were unsuccessful in running away and that you are back at the castle. It is more helpful for us if you remain at the castle. As you know well, our attempt did not work as planned. It was supposed to finish the prince but somehow he is healed, is he not? Do you know how? I had ordered my men to finish him on the spot, but they said it was not possible to shoot him again as you were near him. I had warned them not to hurt you, so they could not risk shooting him while you were nearby. I do not understand, Ella. They said the whole woods heard you crying, and one saw you holding him. What were you doing? He is the dark prince, he took lives from us and you know our plan is to kill him. I hope you were simply faking tears. It has to be.

We heard devastating news from the palace yesterday. We had several people working in the palace on our side before. But now, most of them disagree with our plan to kill the prince, claiming to have witnessed a different side of him. They told me that ever since you came, he started to change and have become kinder to even the servants, and they said that you were working miracles in him. Anyway, I am glad that you are doing your part very well to trick him, to soften him to you, so he would tell you everything. I did not know the prince would easily fall into our trap. Good job, my dear. We all look forward to you luring all his secrets out. But be fast, because time is ticking away and we are fastening our plans. It must be done soon. And one more thing, you must wisely turn the servants against him. They are blinded by his new change, but you could make them see his true form and intentions. We want everyone on our side, and when we strike, we must win.

I hope you are well. There is more to tell you but it cannot be done in this letter. We have to meet in private soon. I will send you another letter when I arrange the meeting.

Until then,

*Sincerely,
The Writer.*

Fury blazed in Austrella's eyes. She clutched the letter in her hands and scoffed.

Her uncle was stupid to think she was working for him, all while she was working with her prince to arrest the duke in a fake case.

Letter in hand, she walked to Liven's study to show it to him and deal with her uncle sooner. As she entered his study, she saw him engrossed in a book, one of the many piled on his table. He told her he was researching the powerful object, and she hesitated to drop the news then, deciding to reveal it later.

Austrella joined him and sat on a chair across from him. Liven told her that his father gave him these books before he left, to search if they had any information about magical objects and their location.

She grabbed a book and scanned through the pages diligently, while Liven flipped through his book, legs propped up casually on the table. The room was such a mess with piles of books and scrolls strewn around.

The book she chose had a range of topics, from magical creatures to enchanters, and even fairies. There was no mention of magical objects. She reached for another one, but it provided the same results.

During the research, she stole glances at her prince, who appeared charming even with his ruffled appearance and hair such a mess. She barely held back her smile. Her concentration flitted towards him several times, and when she wasn't looking, she felt his gaze on her.

"Found anything?" Austrella broke the silence, grabbing another book.

Liven sighed. "No. Not yet." He dropped his book on the table. "It's all about enchantments, magical beings, this and that. Nothing about magical objects." Frustration rang in his voice and he ran his fingers through his hair, making it even messier.

Austrella leaned back in her chair. "It's okay, we'll find it. There must be something. There are more books yet to look at anyway. But how do these objects work? I mean, how did you know the objects you found were not the *most* powerful? Did you use them or something?"

"Well, Father's friend, the one who read my curse, mentioned that there would be a significant moment, something... profound when I found the most

powerful thing. And it didn't happen with any of those. Meaning, they're not the ones I need." His voice grew soft as he spoke, and slowly, he stood from his chair.

"What kind of moment?"

Liven shrugged. "I don't know. We can only know when it happens—when I find *the* most powerful thing." He walked over to her, coming to a stop behind her. "I just wonder what it is and where to find it."

Austrella craned her neck, looking back at him. "Are you okay?" she asked, concerned by his exhausted voice.

He gazed down at her with a small sigh. When he didn't respond, she frowned.

"Don't lose your hope, Liven. I know you've been searching for this for years, but you *will* find it. Maybe you haven't searched in the right place yet. But you will, you'll find it and finally, you will be free. Just keep searching. It will be somewhere."

A smile rose to his lips and his shoulders relaxed slightly. "Maybe I just have to search in the right place, huh?" Bending down, he placed a tender kiss on the top of her head. "Only, I don't know where the right place is."

"We'll find it. I just know it. I promise I will help you find it." Austrella turned back to the book.

Liven's fingers brushed her shoulders gently and he leaned down. "How lucky I am to have you," he whispered, placing his face on the crook of her neck and planting a kiss there. "Mm... I think I should read with you. It's far enjoyable."

His warm breath tickled her skin and Austrella couldn't help her smile from widening. "Then I may not be able to help you because I cannot concentrate," she muttered, closing the book. "But tell me, are you really okay? You've been... quite bothered since... the last visitor."

Liven sighed and he straightened, his hands remaining on her shoulders. "It was the curse reader, you know. His name is Franklin. You must've heard Father mention it before. He wanted to know if I had found anything."

Austrella noticed his voice getting heavy. She rose from her chair and faced him. "Did he say something? When you came back, you... you seemed... angry."

Liven dropped his gaze. "I'm sorry for putting my emotions into action and kissing you harshly."

She shook her head hastily, despite the blush. “No, you don’t—don’t apologize. It was more than okay.” Just one thought of the kiss made her insides tingle.

His ocean eyes met hers, and his lips twitched. “Oh, you loved it, didn’t you?”

Austrella swallowed, supporting herself against the table and hugging the book against her chest. “So did you.”

Liven smiled softly. “I love every moment with you.” Walking to her, he took the book from her and placed it on the table. He took her hands and kissed them tenderly before holding them against his chest. She leaned into his embrace. “Franklin said I must find the powerful thing soon... he said it’s important that I must break the curse quickly.”

Austrella saw the alarm in his eyes and felt dread sweep into her own body. “Soon? Like how soon?”

“Very soon.”

“A-and if you don’t...”

Something flashed in his eyes and they turned unreadable. “I must find it,” he said.

Austrella released a breath. “And you will.” She held onto his hands tightly. “You will find it; the Creator will bring you to it. Don’t lose hope, okay?” Lifting her hand from his hold, she touched his face and he leaned closer. “And I promise you, I will go through these books today as well and see if I can find anything. I’ll try to contact Lorcan and my grandmother as well, to know if they know anything or if they can ask someone and—*someone* must know! And maybe, you know, maybe your father is journeying to find it too. He’s simply not admitting it because he doesn’t want to raise your hopes. Let’s pray he *will* find it.”

Liven smiled and kissed her forehead, cradling her face in his warm hands. “Father has been fussing around mumbling about the curse, cursing me, blaming me, giving me discouraging thoughts, thoughts of hopelessness, while you...” He kissed her forehead again. “My rebellious princess, you’re painting a rainbow when the storm is rising, shoving away the dark clouds with your beautiful light, winning despair over with bright hope. How can you not be my most powerful thing?”

Austrella’s lips curled up in a smile, her heart swelling. “That, you must know, I’m not an object.”

Liven kissed the bridge of her nose, his fingers tracing the contours of her cheeks. “No one ever confirmed it to be an object. Just some guesses.”

“But if I were what you needed to find, your curse would’ve been broken already, but it hasn’t, which means I’m not what you need.”

Liven held her chin up, glancing down at her sternly. “You are *all* I need,” he said. “Ella, I want you. I need you, really. And when I hold you, I feel this fire burning inwith me, so many powerful feelings, and I don’t know if I could ever feel or find anything more powerful than that.”

A teary luster coated her eyes suddenly and Austrella lowered her gaze, the smile remaining on her lips. He kissed her forehead again and gathered her in his arms, enveloping her in his warmth. She wrapped her arms around him, resting her head on his chest where everything felt right. It felt homely.

“I never got a chance to apologize,” Liven murmured near her ear. “For taking over your home, making you run away and live all these years nowhere but within—”

“Liven, stop.” Austrella lifted her head, her chin pressed against his chest as she looked up and met his loving ocean eyes. “Don’t you dare apologize for it. Goodness gracious, Liven, *this* is truly where you belong.” He opened his mouth to protest but she beat him to it. “This castle, this kingdom is yours, not mine. And you, you had all the right to do whatever you did. My papa killed your brothers and he deserved it... he deserved whatever happened—”

“But *you* didn’t deserve it,” Liven interrupted. “You were only... you were only nine.”

“And you were only fifteen when your brothers—all three of them—were killed. Executed. Maybe I thought it was unfair of you, maybe I blamed you for the life I lived, but look at me, I believe that whatever I went through had a purpose, just like everything has. Yes, my life was terrible. Both of our lives were, in different ways. Yes, I did live all these years thinking I lost my brother, but now that I know he is alive, and now that I know I haven’t lost anyone... you are the one whose life was crushed more than mine, Liven. You lost your loved ones, but I didn’t. So, don’t you ever apologize about it again.”

His eyes glistened as he stared down at her before kissing her forehead again. “How can you not be my most powerful thing?”

Austrella chuckled. "The answer is easy. First, I'm not a thing. Second, I'm not powerful."

"Yet you, my rebellious princess, give me the most powerful feeling."

She chuckled again, and rested her head on his chest, closing her eyes to dwell in the moment. "I like my nickname."

"Like I said, one of a hundred," he muttered against her hair. "Oh, there's something I want to show you." He dropped his arms from her and moved around the table to pull open a drawer. He retrieved a portrait and came back to her side. "These were my brothers, and not to mention, me, who hardly survived with them *and* without them."

Taking the portrait from his hands, Austrella stared at it with a smile of surprise. Young Liven stood proudly in the center. He was flanked by two older boys on either side, with another boy who looked older than all of them behind, hands on Liven's shoulders.

Her smile turned painful. "You all looked so happy."

"Looks are deceiving, my love. Those three always annoyed the magic out of me," he joked. "And I had wished to get rid of them, but when they left..." Liven trailed off, sighing together with her.

She leaned closer to him. "I must admit, you look adorable."

A soft chuckle escaped his lips and he pressed a kiss on her temple. "And now?" His whisper was husky.

She giggled as his lips tickled her ear. She turned to him with a shy but mischievous smile. "You're distracting..."

Liven smirked. "Charmingly distracting?"

Austrella rolled her eyes. "Oh, please, don't flatter yourself. But the truth must be said. Yes, I think you're very, *very* charmingly distracting."

Liven kissed her temple again before delving back into the drawer to retrieve another portrait. "This is my much younger version with my father, and my uncle who passed away."

Placing away the other one, Austrella took the portrait from him and studied it closely, with a wide smile of adoration at seeing a much younger Liven. But her smile fell almost as quickly when her eyes fell upon the man who held young Liven.

Austrella gasped.

There, in the background, was the unmistakable face of the man she had encountered in the secret of the secret passageway.

Her eyes bulged in shock, and a chill slithered down her spine.

“What’s wrong?” Liven inquired immediately, sounding alerted.

Her fingers trembled as she pointed to the man in the portrait next to King Leopold. She turned to him, eyes filled with disbelief and fear. “T-this... this is your uncle?”

Liven’s eyebrows were knitted together as his eyes flickered from her to the portrait. “Yes, that’s my uncle. What’s wrong?”

“This is the man I met in the secret passageway!”

Liven’s eyes grew wide. “What?” He blinked. “This,” he pointed to his uncle, “is the man you saw in the passageway? Are you sure?”

“Yes, it is. I’m so sure. I saw his face, Liven, and this... this is him. Wait, but didn’t you... didn’t you just say he passed away?”

Liven’s expression shifted into a mix of emotions, and he nodded slowly. “Yes. My uncle is dead. That’s what Father told me. My uncle traveled far away and died somehow. I don’t know anything more about it, that’s all Father told me. He died when I was only eleven. And, he’s not a wizard. But he was after magic. He’d even said he envied me since I was the only one born with powers in our family and my kind is rare. I did hear Father telling my eldest brother...” He trailed off.

“What?” she asked, watching as his eyebrows furrowed deep.

“That my uncle always wanted to find magic. Someone offered to teach him dark magic, and he left. But I don’t know what happened next, whether he got dark magic or not. Uncle used to write to us after he left, but after a few years, the letters stopped and we were worried. My father left in search of him, where he had told us he lived. But the people there seemed not to know what had happened to him. We were forced to believe he passed away.”

“*Forced* to believe?” she asked. “Which means it’s not confirmed. That, there’s no proof if he’s dead or not. And *that* means... he is *not* dead.” Liven stared at her with unreadable eyes, seemingly considering her point. “Liven, I know what I saw. This is *him*, with no doubt. He looked the same, perhaps a little bit older, but it *was* him. You said he was after magic, and what if he found it? What if he wasn’t killed but just ran away for something—I don’t know, it could be

anything like that. And! He was in your father's room! That means your father knows it... and it seems like your uncle is living hidden here, which was why he threatened me not to tell anyone. But... *why?*"

Her mind pondered more questions than answers.

"It makes sense," Liven muttered. "But why would Father hide it? *Hide* him!"

Austrella's eyebrows furrowed as she contemplated the implication. "This is confusing. But... there must be a reason. Your father knows, and maybe he's the one who kept him in the secret passageway."

Liven ran a hand through his hair, clearly troubled. "But why does he have to hide? What is he up to?"

"There must be some reason," she muttered. The puzzle pieces were slowly falling into places, but there was still more to be figured out. "There must be a reason why he's hiding and your father is hiding him." She glanced down at the portrait. "It is really him, Liven, I'm certain of it. They must be up to something."

Liven left her side to pace back and forth, seemingly trying to figure things out. "I will ask Father as soon as he returns."

Austrella bit her lip, hesitating. "Do you think that's a good idea, if your father is involved in whatever your uncle is up to? Like, what if they're secretly planning something and wouldn't be... pleased to know we found out?"

Liven ran both his hands through his hair in frustration before striding to her.

He took the portrait from her hands and put it away before enveloping her in his arms, as if only holding her could calm him down. All the bothering, swirling thoughts stopped as Austrella melted into his arms and closed her eyes. A sigh escaped her. She felt him calming along with her.

"We'll figure this out in secret," he murmured softly. "You're right. I shouldn't ask Father. If I know him any better, it will only mess up things, especially since whatever he is up to is a secret. But if my uncle is hiding, why would he be in the secret passageway? Because the servants often use it."

Austrella felt a twinge of guilt and didn't hesitate to confess, "Actually, he was... he was in the inner secret passageway, which is inside the secret passageway the servants know. It is only known by the royal family to know. None of the servants or anyone else knows about it. I truly wonder how he found out."

“An inner secret passageway?”

“It’s hidden in the secret passageway and it isn’t easy to open it. It is the one we used to escape back then. Only the royal family knows, well, until now, I guess. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you before, but I can’t tell you how to open it. The threat remains.”

“My own uncle threatening to kill me and my bride? There’s something really serious going on then.” He sighed. “Now I have to deal with my curse *and* my father and my uncle.”

“And *my* uncle too,” Austrella added, her tone bitter at the mere thought of Travis. “I... I received a letter from him today and it was horrible.”

Liven was silent for a brief moment. “What did he say?”

Austrella was hesitant to show him the letter because of all the things her uncle had written in it. Nevertheless, she showed him.

Liven’s eyes grew dark when he adsorbed the words of the letter, and he held her closer as if she were their target instead. She practically felt his frustration increasing, and she was frustrated too, as now they had three problems to solve.

“I will deal with your uncle first before finding about my uncle,” he said after a moment of staring at the letter.

Austrella tipped her head back to look at him. “Scratch that. Not you. *We*. We are going to deal with it.” She pulled her lips up into a smile.

His ocean eyes turned to her, a smile dancing on his lips. “Oh, are we?”

To lighten up the mood, she put on a teasing smirk. “As long as I’m here, you will never get to deal with anything alone. So, you’re stuck with me, Your Highness.”

“And so are you, my rebellious princess.” He smirked and leaned down to kiss her forehead. “I have something for you.”

“What is it?”

Liven put aside the letter to hold her face in his hands. “There’s something I should’ve done a long time ago, something I couldn’t do, but... I want to make things right. I want to do the right thing, and since Father won’t be returning soon, I’ve decided to free your brother and let him run away, to join your family.”

It took a moment of stunned silence before his words finally sank in. Austrella’s eyes widened.

Free Adam...

Her lips parted in an attempt to speak, she was speechless for a brief moment. She gaped at him, and he smiled at her shocked face. “Y-you’re going to... free Adam?”

Liven nodded. “Yes. It’s the right thing to do.”

Her joy deepened, but she stared at him in disbelief. Then she furrowed her eyebrows. “But your father—he wouldn’t let—he wouldn’t be pleased—”

Liven placed a finger on her lips, silencing her. “Yes, he wouldn’t be pleased, but not to worry, before he left, he gave me the power to take care of things *in* the place of the king. And here I am, taking care of things as I must. Moreover, Father will step down from the throne when he returns. He said so. He said to have other plans for himself, which I have started to doubt now. However, he told me to act as the king before I will be crowned, and I have the power to do *whatever* I want.”

“And you’re going to free my brother?”

“Yes.”

Tears sprang into her eyes, sparkling in the joy that overwhelmed her. Austrella had not expected this day to arrive so soon. She flung her arms around his neck and hugged him tight. When he hugged her back, she could sense him smiling. “Thank you.”

“I’d do anything for you.”

The east wing; it is forbidden...

King Leopold’s words rang in her head as her curiosity led her to the east wing.

The king undoubtedly held a secret in there, something that must be connected with Liven’s uncle. Suspicious about what it might be, Austrella wanted to find out.

She had been to the east wing a few times before, before it was forbidden. The hallway was dimly lit unlike the last time, appearing quite like a prohibited place full of secrets. The air itself was heavy with secrecy.

As her exploration continued, a door caught her attention. A particular door that was slightly ajar. Fear curled in her stomach as she anticipated finding the wizard there. She neared the door and peeked inside. Like the hallway, the room

was dimly lit as well, and through the small gap, she didn't spot anything in particular.

Austrella opened the door fully.

The room was small and almost empty with no tapestries on the wall. But at the center of the room stood a crafted small table, and upon it stood a single red rose.

The rose had a faint gleam that held an allure for her, prompting her to enter the room and draw near to the table. The rose was preserved inside a delicate glass covering as if to keep it safe, and the flower hovered a few inches in the air by some unseen magic.

Confused, Austrella couldn't help herself from nearing it. She halted near the table, staring at the enchanting rose. A few petals had fallen on the table inside the covering. And the fallen ones had lost their soft gleam.

What was this?

Austrella hesitated before reaching out a hand and touching the smooth surface of the glass. When she touched it, a tingling sensation coursed through her.

"Well, well, look who's here."

Austrella whirled around in panic. Her eyes landed on Liven, standing at the door.

"You startled me," Austrella breathed, her hand moving to her chest instinctively.

"What a surprise to find you in a forbidden place, my love. What are you doing here?" Liven asked, walking in with his hands clasped behind him. His gaze flickered to the rose, and his eyes darkened. Then his eyes slid back to her, his look softening.

"What is this?" Austrella asked in a sense of wonder, glancing back at the rose as she took a step away from the table.

"You skipped my question, Ella," he said, and she turned to see a smile tugging on his lips. "Why are you wandering in the *forbidden* wing?"

Her lips twitched. "Because it's forbidden," she answered casually, before glancing at the rose again. "It's magical, isn't it? Since your father has forbid everyone from coming here, I thought there must be some... dark secrets here, or the wizard himself."

“Rebellious princess, indeed.”

A chuckle escaped her lips. “Hey!” She shot him a glance before turning to the flower in mystery. “Do you know what this is?”

As silence descended, Austrella turned to him.

She frowned. Liven was staring at the rose with a clenched jaw and his face... She couldn't figure out his emotions, but it wasn't a pleasant one.

“What is it?”

At her question, he turned his gaze back on her, and his face softened. Then a small smile stretched faintly on his lips. “So, my rebellious princess broke the rule?”

Attempting to hide a smile, she raised an eyebrow. “What rule?”

“That no one shall set a foot on the east wing because it's forbidden.” His smile grew mischievous.

Austrella turned away, her lips twisting into a smirk as she asked, “Well, isn't that why I'm here? To know what's so forbidden about this place.”

As she continued to stare at the mysterious rose, Liven's presence neared her. “Since you broke the rule, don't you think you need a punishment?” He halted behind her and his arms encircled her from behind, sending a thrill down her spine.

She couldn't stop her smile.

“Whenever someone breaks a rule, they usually deserve some kind of punishment, and I think you should get one too.” His warm breath brushed against her ear.

“What kind of?” She swallowed anxiously, holding his arms around her as her knees began to weaken.

His lips brushed against her earlobe. “Be alert, because I have a perfect punishment for you.”

Then, taking her by surprise, Liven turned her and gently pushed her back, pinning her against the wall nearby. Austrella gasped.

He pressed his lips to hers and kissed her roughly, his hands on her waist, trapping her against the wall. She kissed him back and he growled low as he deepened it, closing every single bit of distance between them. Her fingers clutched onto his collar powerlessly, trembling with the intensity of the kiss.

The world, the worries, and everything else were forgotten. It was just them, locked in a passionate embrace that she longed to last forever.

His lips left hers and placed tender kisses on her cheeks. Catching her breath, Austrella managed to speak with her eyes closed. "If... if you're going to punish me... like this, then I will break... *every* rule."

"Oh, would you?" Liven trailed kisses on her jaw and down her neck. Then he captured her lips again. "I must admit, I'm surprised by your courage to come here even when you expected a frightening wizard, not a charming prince," he said after pulling away, leaning his forehead against hers.

"Not a charming rose, you mean?" Austrella asked breathily. "Do you know about it?"

Liven's lips caressed her cheek tantalizingly, making her heart flutter even more. "The rose is the last thing I want to talk about now."

Austrella's eyes fluttered open. "What do you mean?"

"Let's not talk about it now."

Her hands reached his face and made him look at her. "You know about it."

A shadow fell over his eyes. "It'll ruin the moment."

"Tell me."

"Ella, it will ruin the moment." His eyes grew unreadable. "I will tell you at night, but not now..."

Austrella stared at him. "Liven," she whispered softly, brushing a finger across his face, making his eyes close briefly. "I don't understand... what is it?"

Liven pressed his forehead against hers and closed his eyes, his face tormented. "Ella," he called her desperately. "For the last two days, I've been trying all my best to tell you about this, but I couldn't find the words... I can't even think of telling you about it."

"Liven." She continued to stroke his face. "You can tell me anything. You must know I'm here for you, so don't hesitate."

Liven opened his eyes and cupped her face tenderly. "There's something about my curse that I haven't told you. The worst part of it. Did you see the fallen petals?"

She nodded slowly.

His eyes tightened as he opened his mouth to continue, distress crossing his face. "When... when the final petal falls..." He paused for a long moment. When

he spoke next, all the breath left her lungs. “I will die.”

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Her shock was palpable as his words sank in.

Eyes widened in disbelief, Austrella gaped at him, as if his words had shifted the place to a nightmare.

It certainly had.

“What?” Her voice was quiet.

Liven released her, taking a step back as he nodded, his face solemn. “Yes. That’s the part of the curse I *couldn’t* tell you. I had known I would die one day if I didn’t break the curse—it’s a part of the curse the enchanter cast. But I didn’t know when... until Franklin came and said my days are nearing the end. After he had read the curse, he enchanted this rose to know my days on earth. The petals didn’t fall for the past years until this week. When the petals began to fall, he realized that my time is nearing an end and came here as quickly as he could. The petals are falling each day... and when the final one does...”

Austrella’s breath was trapped in her throat, and her horror deepened. Her wide eyes turned to the rose and her steps neared the table. She took in the fallen petals, trying to count them. “A lot of them have already fallen, Liven.”

“I know.”

“Did you know about the rose all this time?” Austrella demanded, overwhelmed by a flurry of emotions.

“Not until Franklin brought it.”

“And it’s been *two* days! Two days and you didn’t tell me? Tell me that...” Austrella trailed off, running out of breath as realization sank deeper, cruelly. Tears flooded her eyes, and she stumbled a step back, clasping her hands over her mouth. “O-oh my Creator... you’re... you’re going to *die*!”

Liven watched her solemnly. “I’m cursed to die, Ella. The enchanter cursed me saying if I didn’t find the most powerful thing, I would die. But I swear, only

when Franklin came did I realize the little time I have—”

“But you knew—you *knew* you’re going to die! You knew... You knew *all* this time, but you didn’t tell me.” Hurt flashed in her eyes.

Liven’s eyes pleaded silently as he stepped forward. “I... I thought I could break it before my time was up, that’s why I didn’t want to tell you. I thought I would find it. That’s why I’ve been delaying our marriage and all the preparation for it even when my father wanted it within a week. I wanted to find it and break my curse before we began our life. But I didn’t know... that I have only a *little* time left...”

“And it’s been two days since you’ve known this, two days since you knew you’re going to die real soon and you didn’t say a word!” Austrella snapped, her emotions a tempest of anger, hurt, dread, and misery. “Were you planning on not telling me, so not knowing anything, one day I would just find you dead and gone, and hate you for the rest of my life for it?”

“I was going to tell you, Ella. Tonight.” He took another step forward, remorse etched on his features. “You have no idea how many times did I try to tell you... but I just couldn’t.”

“You didn’t have to hide.” Her voice broke. “You could’ve told me the truth about your curse, because here I was, thinking that I finally had you back after nearly losing you, believing I wouldn’t have to face that again! But look now...” She turned away, running her hands through her hair as she shook her head.

“You must know how hard it was for me to accept it, and worse, when I thought of looking in your face and telling you I’m going to die... Do you know how hard it is? I didn’t want to ruin your happiness. I thought I could find a way to break it before you ever needed to know,” Liven explained, his voice earnest, firm, and a whirlwind of emotions she couldn’t recognize.

Austrella squeezed her eyes shut, fingers clutching in her hair as tears streamed down her face. Her heart ached so badly. “The rose—it has... only a few... a few petals left,” she choked out. As silence descended, she turned around to find his gaze on the ground. Hopeless. Defeated. “There are only a few petals left, Liven!” she cried.

Liven met her gaze with such tenderness and remorse. “I know,” he whispered before stepping towards her. “I know, Ella, I know. They are falling

quickly, I know. I know I should've told you earlier—" He reached out for her, but she stepped away.

"Yes, you could've told me!" Austrella cried in rage. "You would've... you *would've* told me if you truly loved me!"

"I love—"

"Because I was here, Liven! Thinking of my future with you—a future I thought of *even* when I tried to run away, a future that burst from ashes when you miraculously woke up! But you... you knew all along that it wouldn't happen, you knew all along that you're going to leave me..." A sob broke out and she covered her face.

She couldn't bear thinking of losing him again. An image of Liven's lifeless body flashed in her mind, and her body shook with sobs.

"I don't want to leave you, Ella. All I want is to live with you. I don't want any of this, I don't want to die." Liven was right in front of her, and he held her hands, trying to uncover her face, but she refused to yield. "Ella, love, please look at me."

His broken yet beautiful, desperate voice crushed her heart with utter pain. "N-no, no, no, don't—don't touch me." She backed away and turned. "Y-you're going to leave me, you're... going to tear me apart."

"Ella—"

"Why did you come after me all those times then?" Austrella turned around, her hands down as she faced him, her face drenched in tears. Her voice rose. "Every time I ran away, why did you come after me? *Why*, Liven? Why did you steal my heart when you knew all along that you're going to crush it into pieces?"

Her question seemed to pierce through Liven; hurt flashed across his features. "Because you stole mine!" His voice wavered, and his eyes grew wet.

Austrella couldn't bear looking at the face of the man she'd soon lose. She looked away at the rose, and her eyes widened when, right before her eyes, a petal fell.

A strangled sob escaped her lips. How long did she have with him?

How long until he would shatter her entire world?

"Ella—"

"No, don't," she pleaded, stepping back. She couldn't bear listening to him anymore. She was completely broken. "All along you knew... you knew you'd

die, yet you let me fall for you, deeply... and harder, only to ruin me.”

As the need to cry aloud became unbearable, she stormed out of the room, ignoring his desperate calls.

Once inside her room, Austrella collapsed against the door. She couldn't control herself any longer; she cried out loud, clutching her hair, and slid down to the floor.

The pain of losing Liven, the man who had become her entire world in just a matter of days, was utterly unbearable. It felt like trying to pluck out her heart.

Austrella loved him more than anything. She loved him so much that she would hate him if he ever left her.

But he was going to leave her.

She cried and cried harder, her heart already a shattered glass. If he left, there would be no heart. No life.

Only then did Austrella realize he had not only become her heart but also her life.

Her everything.

Crying was wasteful. She needed to do something to keep Liven with her; there was only a matter of time before the rest of the petals fell.

She headed for his study. She didn't want to see Liven, so she was thankful that he was absent. She gathered all the books about magical things and carried them to her room. She scattered them on her bed, hoping that at least one of them would be the answer to their prayers.

Austrella turned page after page frantically, reading passages about magical creatures, and ancient spells, but not a mention of a magical object she sought. Every time she reached for the next book, her tears increased and wet the pages like raindrops.

She went through the very last book, but the answer wasn't there either. She cried in agony, throwing away all the books around her room in a rage.

Where was the answer?

Was there really *the* most powerful thing?

What was so powerful?

Crying, she found herself sliding down her bed to the floor, hugging her knees to her chest.

Amidst her despair, a gentle knock sounded on the door. She didn't respond, lost in the depths of her sorrow. Another knock came. Again, she chose not to respond.

Then she heard the door opening, and when she turned her tear-stained face towards it, she saw Liven in the doorway.

Her heart skipped a beat, and her desperation rose. "Liven." His name fell from her lips like a desperate cry.

As much his sight pained her, she knew only in his arms could she calm down.

But what was she going to do when those arms could no longer hold her?

"Ella." Liven's voice caressed her name, and he stepped in, closing the door behind him hurriedly.

His face mirrored her own anguish; his eyes glistening with unshed tears and it crushed her soul. He glanced around her room, sighting the books she had thrown around.

"I-I looked everywhere in them, but there's... there's nothing."

He clenched his jaw before turning to her in agony. He walked to her. With every step he took, her desperation grew and his presence lifted just slightly the weight of her sorrow.

In his arms, Austrella knew, she could find peace even amid the angriest of storm.

Liven sat down beside her, and he wrapped his arms around her with a tenderness that only he could provide. She snuggled close instantly, as though she had been waiting for him for years. Fingers clutched on his shirt, she buried her face in his chest.

He held her closer, leaving no distance, and kissed her hair.

"I'm so sorry." His voice was a broken whisper. "I'm sorry, love. I should've told you sooner... I just couldn't, and I'm sorry. I knew it would hurt you and I didn't *want* to hurt you."

Austrella pressed herself tightly against him, as if fearing he would fade away. "I'm sorry too," she whispered. "I-I'm so sorry! I shouldn't have—I shouldn't have lashed out at you like that. I... I was just so horrified, a-and the thought of losing you again... I almost lost you once, and I'm still recovering from the shock of it, and I can't... Please don't leave me."

Liven stroked her hair restlessly and pressed his lips in it. "I will do anything to stay with you. I'm trying everything I can to find it, I promise. I've sent letters to all the enchanters I know, and they will help us. The Creator won't forsake us, love. He will help us find it. He's the only hope we have now."

She nodded, her heartache still raw, but the mention of the Creator provided a glimmer of hope amidst the dark hour. "Just don't leave me," she pleaded. "I-I can't... I don't know what I would do if..." She looked up at him, and his thumb wiped away her tears. "What have you done to me really? I feel like... I can't live without you."

Liven kissed her forehead tenderly before resting his forehead on hers, caressing her cheekbone. "I love you." He breathed. "I love you, Austrella." He kissed the tip of her nose. "With every breath, every heartbeat, I love you."

His words were like a lifeline, pulling her from the depths of her despair and bathing her with love that could heal every wound.

"Kiss me."

Liven captured her mouth with his in an ardent kiss, lingering as if he was sucking out her misery. His fingers wiped away each tear, each caress bathing her in love.

She locked her arms around his neck. When they pulled away, breathless, he gazed at her with a compassion that caught her body on fire. She wiped away the tears that escaped his eyes, holding his face in her hands.

No words were exchanged. Their glances spoke volumes, conveying their heart's desires.

He leaned in and captured her lips in another fierce kiss, this time more urgent. The fierceness of the kiss intensified as they deepened it, stealing breaths.

A knock on the door interrupted their moment, making Liven groan as they pulled away. Catching her breath, Austrella rested her face against his. The knock continued, and she called out, "Who is it?"

"It's me, milady. Maggie."

Austrella suppressed a groan and shot Liven a glance. A smile touched his lips at her annoyance. "I'm kind of very busy here, Maggie!"

"Very busy with her prince," Liven muttered, causing her to forget the pain briefly and smile shyly.

"I apologize for interrupting, milady, but I'm here to convey an important message."

Austrella's eyebrows furrowed before she rose to her feet and approached the door. She opened it to see Maggie wearing a kind smile that fell as quickly as she noticed Austrella's red eyes from crying.

"Are you alright, milady?" the maid asked, concerned.

"Yes, I'm fine. What is it?"

"The duke is calling for a meeting at his manor, my lady. He said it's quite important that you must come."

An uneasy feeling settled in her stomach at the mention of her uncle. "A... meeting?"

The maid nodded and dropped her voice. "It takes place tonight, milady. Past midnight. It's a secret meeting, and a very important one. And he said it's very important that you must attend."

Austrella didn't have to think twice before rejecting the summons. "Please tell the duke that I'm very, very sorry, but I cannot come. I have much more important things to do. But you, Maggie, don't tell me you're on the duke's side..." Her eyes narrowed suspiciously.

The maid shook her head. "No, milady, I'm uncertain of where I stand, for I wish no harm to befall the prince, just like everyone else here. But milady, the duke said it's important—"

"The duke can get—"

"Here, a letter for you from the duke." Maggie held out a folded white paper.

Austrella stared at it for a moment, debating whether she should accept it or not, as it certainly would ruin everything. However, it was her only way to know Travis' plans and be prepared.

She accepted it with an exhausted sigh. "Thank you, Maggie. But you need to tell everyone else that they mustn't stand with the duke, because his intentions are darker than you think. Liven is not a dark prince. Explanations will be shared later, but tell everyone to be with the prince, not the duke."

The maid nodded and left.

"Another stupid letter from the duke," Austrella informed Liven as she closed the door and walked back to him.

“And what does it say this time?” Liven asked, not at all as frustrated as she was. He rose from the floor and sat on her bed.

Austrella sat on the bed beside him and opened the letter. She began to read aloud, “Dear Ella, only after I sent you my last letter was another important plan made. I do not know how you could come here at night, but I want you to try your best to convince the prince and be here; we are having an important meeting tonight that you cannot miss.” She scoffed. “Your parents just arrived here...” She gasped at the revelation. “My parents are here?”

Austrella turned to Liven to find him smiling softly at her surprise. “Then what perfect timing to free your brother.”

She continued to read the letter, “Your parents just arrived here, and rest assured, they will be safe. Not only them, several enchanters have joined us as well. Therefore, you must come and join us no matter what. Your parents are looking forward to seeing you tonight. We all are.” She finished reading and turned to Liven with eyebrows furrowed. “They surely are up to something, are they not? But enchanters? *Several* enchanters? Liven, this is a great chance. I... I could go and... they could help us.”

Liven didn’t seem to share the thought or the hope she had. “Ella, whatever they’re up to, they are against me, and they wouldn’t help us.”

“But...” She dropped the letter and looked around. “I-I could ask them! I mean, I wouldn’t say it’s for you but I’d just ask them if they know what’s the most powerful thing and—surely, since there will be a lot of enchanters, one must know something! Oh, and, Lorcan would be there too, and I can ask him. He’s like a godfather to me and he would tell me anything!”

Her face lit up with hope and she reached for his hand.

“Liven, this is *our* chance. We have to find it, and I would do anything to break your curse. I would go and ask all of them, and since I’m Austrella, possibly they wouldn’t think I’m on your side. Therefore, they would tell me—they *must* tell me! Oh, Liven, this is our greatest chance! And the meeting, it’s happening tonight. I could not only ask the enchanters about the powerful thing, but I can also know their plans. So, can I go?” she gushed.

Surprise flashed in his eyes. “Of course, you can go. Though, I can’t think of not having you by my side for such a long time.” He held her face tenderly in one hand, making her lean in.

“It won’t take much time. Even if it does, it will be worth it. We have to break your curse. And, since it’s taking place at night, when you wake up in the morning, I’ll be right back.”

Liven smiled. “Let’s not forget about Adam. You should take him with you.”

Austrella smiled back, with hope that everyone against her prince would change their minds at the sight of Adam.

“Of course. I wouldn’t dare forget, because he would have my head if I do.”

CHAPTER 18 | CLANDESTINE

Snowflakes descended from the night sky as Austrella stepped out of the castle. Two majestic horses waited for her and Adam in the courtyard, and Adam, being Adam, chose the white one, leaving the dark one for her.

Austrella couldn't help but chuckle and roll her eyes, but she wasn't going to put up a fight like she had done when she was little.

Adam mounted his horse. Austrella turned and hugged Liven, a heavy knot in her heart to leave him. His warmth surpassed the crispy winter air as his arms wrapped around her.

"Promise me once again that you *will* sleep, and that you will lock *all* your doors and windows," Austrella implored.

"I promise. Do not worry about me. I will be fine," Liven assured her, stroking her hair gently. "My assailants are probably all around like snowflakes and could be anyone, so I wouldn't wander around."

"Hey, don't joke about it!" she chided, pulling back from the hug to meet his eyes with a glare that softened immediately. "Liven." She sighed his name.

Liven touched their foreheads together and grazed his knuckles on her cheek, making her eyes flutter close. "Be careful, okay? And be back soon. I don't trust your safety with anyone other than myself, though I know your family wouldn't hurt you."

"I will return as soon as it's finished, I promise. If they don't let me go, then I will escape. I *will* come back to you."

"Good. Because if you don't, I will send out an army to bring you back."

A smile traced her lips, her curiosity surging within her to know what it would be like to have an army sent out for her. "I will. You know I'm quite—"

He dipped low and captured her lips with his, silencing her. She responded quickly, grasping his collar.

Adam cleared his throat loudly, causing them to pull away. "I apologize, but I cannot spend *another* hour watching my little sister romancing. It is clearly awkward," he teased. "Don't romance before me."

Austrella flushed but rolled her eyes. "Seriously, Adam?"

"You should go," Liven said, his hands cradling her face in the way that always sent her heart racing. "We will see each other in a few hours."

"We will see each other in a few hours," she repeated, nodding with a faint smile.

He stole a quick kiss before releasing her. Austrella stepped back and mounted her horse.

The castle gates, usually shut at night, remained open at Liven's orders. Austrella and her brother rode their horses past the gates. She stole one final glance at Liven before she lost sight of him.

They crossed the bridge and reached the snow-covered cobblestone road through the woods to the duke's manor. The ride with Adam was enjoyable—it always had been—as they talked all the way, their voices and the sound of the hooves against the snow shattering the deep silence of the surrounding woods around them. Before long, they reached the manor and the guards let them pass.

At the threshold of the manor waited a guard who was seemingly waiting for her.

"Thank you for coming, my lady. We've been waiting for you for a long time. His Grace had said to expect you in the evening. May I ask who is this young man?" the guard asked politely, inclining his head to Adam once they dismounted their horses.

Austrella opened her mouth to answer, thrilled and curious to know his reaction when he learned it was Prince Adam. "He's my—"

"Friend," Adam interjected, clearing his throat. "I'm her friend. Very, *very* trustful friend."

Austrella turned and arched an eyebrow at him. He sent her a wink.

"Alright. Please, follow me."

The guard led them inside and walked ahead of them, leading the way. As they followed behind him, Austrella shifted closer to her brother. "Why did you introduce yourself like that?"

Adam gave her a coy smile. “Well, I just thought it would be fun if I dropped the bomb at the meeting. It will shock them no end since no one expects the dead—*presumed* dead, I mean—to show up in a meeting.”

The guard flung open the doors of a secluded room and gestured for them to enter. As they stepped inside, Austrella’s heart leaped when her eyes fell on the certain girl perched on a chair.

“Ella!” Aquila gasped as she jumped from her seat and rushed towards her.

“Aquila!” Austrella was surprised, and hurried to her, embracing her cousin tightly. “I wasn’t expecting you.”

“I’ve been waiting for you for hours! When Papa said you would be coming, I was so—*oh*, Ella, you have not a single idea how worried I was about you all these days! Oh, and that letter you left with Papa! It was so unfair of you not to call me when you came by, though I understand your situation. I was so worried if the prince—did he do anything—”

“Aquila, take a deep breath.” Austrella chuckled with tearful eyes, slowly pulling away from the hug. “I know, and I’m sorry that I didn’t call you then, but I’m here now, aren’t I?”

Aquila’s eyes were flooded with tears as she nodded. “Of course, you’re here. Oh, you have no idea how many times I thought to come and visit you, but Papa told me not to—he has a reason, of course. But... are you alright? Did *he* let you come or did you escape? I honestly did not expect you to come now, at midnight, thinking it would definitely make the dark prince suspect something. What did you tell him? How did he treat you? Did he ever hurt—”

“Aquila,” Austrella cut her off again, this time firmly, and clasped her shoulders. “Liven is the kindest human I’ve ever met, and no, he will never hurt me. He treated me so well with such care more than anyone had ever given me. And yes, he let me come.” Her heart warmed as she spoke of her prince.

Aquila was baffled. “Kindest human? What do you mean? I mean, he’s the dark...” She trailed off as she looked past Austrella’s shoulder. “Oh, who is this?”

Austrella turned to her brother, wondering if she should reveal his identity or not. Adam smiled, leaning against the doorframe as he folded his arms. “I’m her closest friend. Who are you?”

“I’m Aquila, her cousin. But who are *you*?”

“Let’s say, I’m the king’s secret knight and I shall not spill my name until His Majesty allows me.”

Aquila narrowed her eyes suspiciously. “The king?”

“Oh, forgive me, Miss Aquila—”

“*Lady* Aquila,” she corrected with a lift of her chin.

Austrella could see Adam’s amusement breaking through his pretense. “Yes, *lady* Aquila. Forgive me; I almost forgot Catsimoor have two kings. However, I’m King Truficas’ knight.”

“Better be,” Aquila muttered and turned back to Austrella. “There are so many things to tell you, but I suppose it has to wait, especially with *this* secret knight friend of yours here. So, shall we go to the meeting?”

Aquila moved to the center of the room and bent to the wide mat on the floor. She lifted the corner of it and moved it away, revealing a trapdoor set into the ground. “For safety of the matters being discussed, here’s where the meeting is held.” She motioned towards the trapdoor. “There’s an underground chamber and everyone is in there, including your parents. It’s the safest place for them.”

Austrella’s lips parted as she realized the meeting was way more suspicious than she’d expected. She exchanged a glance with Adam, who seemed to share her thoughts.

Aquila grabbed the lamp from a nearby table and opened the trapdoor. She lowered the lamp into the gap, and Austrella moved closer, spotting a ladder leading downward. Faint voices and hushed conversations echoed from below.

“Follow me,” Aquila said as she began her descent down the ladder, holding the lamp to light the way. Austrella followed her with Adam, her heartbeat quickening in anticipation.

Reaching the ground, she found herself in a space quite different from the elegant halls of the manor above. The walls were made of stone, and the atmosphere was not pleasing. It was cold, slightly damp, and eerie.

Or perhaps it was eerie because whatever was going on within this place was against her prince.

Aquila led the way through the narrow passageway and the voices of people grew louder. The underground passage seemed to go on a little far ahead until it finally opened into a large room. Torches on the wall provided enough light to see the gathering of individuals who had come for this clandestine meeting.

The room was filled with people, royal guards and servants included. Anger welled up within Austrella as she wondered how many of them the duke had on his side.

No one seemed to notice her until...

"Make way for Her Royal Highness, Princess Austrella!" Aquila announced, her voice cutting through the chatter like a clarion call.

Austrella almost jumped in surprise, turning to her cousin with wide eyes at the unexpected and unwanted announcement.

Gasps rippled through the crowd, chatters stopped, and everyone turned. All eyes fell on her.

She stiffened.

People gaped at her as they moved backward on either side, creating a path for her. Aquila grabbed her hand and dragged her forward. Whispers buzzed like a swarm of bees as people exchanged hushed murmurs to each other in disbelief.

"Ella!" a woman's voice cried in surprise. Austrella spun around to find her mother, Kiona, rushing towards her with open arms.

"Mama." She gasped, leaving Aquila's side, and rushing into her mother's arms. Though she was aware of the sea of eyes observing them, she couldn't help the tears that welled up as they embraced.

Kiona pulled away from the hug and held Austrella at arm's length, examining her. "Ella, my dear, look at you! Much better than the last time I saw you. I had no hope of seeing you anytime soon, but here you are. I've missed you!"

Austrella smiled wide. "I missed you too, Mama. But what is actually happening here?"

"There is much to say, but we shall wait until the meeting is over—"

"But I cannot wait to reunite with my daughter." A deep, male voice came from behind Austrella and she spun around to see her father, Truficas, with a wide smile. "Hello, Ella."

He opened his arms.

Austrella's lips parted in surprise, but something tightened inside her. She couldn't find the same happiness to see him as she felt with her mother. Nevertheless, she smiled and hugged him. He patted on her back. "I missed you dearly, my dear," he whispered.

Though his words were warm and genuine, all she could think of was what he had done to Liven's brothers. She failed to return his words.

"I'm quite happy to see you, Ella; we've been so worried about you."

"I'm better than ever." Austrella forced a smile as she pulled away, meeting his wide smile. "But what is going down here?" Her gaze darted around.

"I hope you got the second message I sent you." Another voice chimed in from behind; her uncle. He approached them and stood by his brother's side, putting an arm around him.

Austrella's stomach tightened with unease and displeasure at the sight of him, but she had to play nice until she learned their entire plan. Therefore, she forced a smile and a nod. "How else would I have known about this meeting?"

Truficas and Travis chuckled. "Indeed. But I must say I was completely stunned when the guard returned in the evening to convey your shocking words," Travis said, a slight suspicion stirring in his gaze.

Austrella gulped before shrugging casually. "I wasn't in a good mood then, so..."

Her father nodded sympathetically. "That's understandable. Who would be in a good mood when they're staying with the dark prince?"

Austrella clenched her jaw, struggling to maintain her composure. She averted her eyes in a fit of fury that she tried to press down. Then her eyes fell on a familiar smiling face among the crowd.

"Lorcan," she whispered in surprise and walked away from her father to the enchanter.

Austrella was surprised that she felt happier to see him more than her own father. The enchanter's eyes wrinkled as his smile grew wide. "Hello, there, *Your Highness*," he greeted, stepping forward with open arms that she soon rushed into. He chuckled as he patted her head. "It's so good to see you again, Ella."

"It's so good to see you too, Lorcan," she mumbled against the hug, smiling. "I've been planning on writing to you soon because there's something..." She pulled away, the smile fading. "I really need your help."

Lorcan clasped his hands on her shoulders as he leaned down. "What is it?"

"Do you know what the most powerful thing is? The most powerful magical object or something?"

Lorcan's eyebrows furrowed deeply. "Most powerful object? I don't think I —"

"Can I have your attention please?" Her father's voice boomed through the room, and the chatters slowly crept into silence. He seemed to step on a higher point of ground so that everyone could see him. "Since I believe every invited person has arrived, we shall begin our meeting. First of all, thank you all for being here today. I extend my gratitude to each one of you for your valuable hearts to save our kingdom and our people. I'd also like to take a moment to express my heartfelt thanks to our brave guards and loyal servants within the castle who did not get trapped or blinded by the dark prince and have secretly passed on the word of our tomorrow's plan to the loyal citizens.

"Now, let's delve into the matter that I have called you all here for. You all know what it is, but I would like to make our plans clear before we accomplish it. We have important information from one of my enchanter friends that the dark prince has a curse! He was cursed when he invaded our kingdom and killed the crown prince and several others. A brave enchanter, to whom I'm forever grateful, cursed him saying that, if he doesn't find the most powerful thing, he will die. Since the curse, everything the prince does with his powers backfires on him. For years, the dark prince has tirelessly searched for magical objects to break his curse but has not found anything. The enchanters whom he sought help from are all here present."

Austrella's eyes widened.

"But pity the prince, there is no such a thing as *the* most powerful thing. There are powerful things, objects, and people, but there's no certain *the* most powerful thing. Let us say, the prince was deceived. The brave enchanter knew there was no *the* most powerful thing and that is why he told him to find it, because he will never get to break it. One day ago, our enchanters received an urgent letter from the prince himself that he has to find the most powerful thing as soon as possible because he realized that his days are drawing near to the end.

"Yes, the prince is going to be dead in a few days from the curse, but I stand before you all today to declare that the story of the dark prince will not conclude with the curse. It is us who will determine the prince's fate as our revenge, after everything he has done to us. We shall not allow the curse to be the hero and kill him, because he is ours to take and destroy."

Austrella struggled to breathe as realization hit her like a thunderbolt.

Liven was deceived. There was no *the* most powerful thing. His curse couldn't be broken.

He would die.

All the enchanters he thought faithful were, in truth, against him.

Fear began to paralyze her. Her heart was in her throat, beating like a bird trapped in a cage.

All the hope she had held onto turned to ashes. The reality had turned into a nightmare.

The crowd around her erupted in cheers at her father's words, like a reminder that they were with him.

Her father continued, fiercer than before. "When morning breaks, we shall strike! We will not cower any longer! We will take back what is rightfully ours—yes, we will save our kingdom and our people! And I will be the one to end the dark prince once and for all! He took my crown, my son, my kingdom, and my everything; but this morning, we will rise and take it all back! We will not rest until we have saved our Catsimoor! This morning, the dark prince is finally going to die!"

Cheers filled the underground chamber as the people echoed with determination, but Austrella's banging, panicked heartbeat surpassed all the noises. Her anger flared.

"No! You won't kill him!"

Her outburst shattered the thunderous applause that filled the room. Voices quieted and heads turned around to her. Defiantly, she moved from Lorcan's side and strode through the crowd to where her father stood.

She couldn't believe who her father had become. The man she had always looked up to, the one who had always been warm and full of wisdom, was now a stranger—cold and unyielding.

Truficas' eyebrows furrowed as she neared him, mirroring the confused expressions of the people around her. "What did you say, my dear?"

Austrella halted a few feet from him, her gaze locked onto her father's unwavering one.

Her voice shook with anger. "You heard me, Papa. You will *not* kill him. No one will."

CHAPTER 19 | UNBROKEN

Truficas blinked. “What?”

Austrella curled her hands into fists, digging her nails into her palm to control her fury. “Liven is not a dark prince.”

Truficas descended from the raised stone he stood upon, his eyebrows furrowed with caution. “Ella, do not tell me you are under his spell.”

She shook her head vehemently. “No, Papa, I’m not under any spell. All I’m speaking is the truth. I know the truth, and I know you know do too, at least a main part of it. But do these people know about it? Have you told them the truth? Do they know that—”

“Ella, what are you doing?” Truficas interrupted with a stern hiss, drawing nearer to her, his eyes narrowed.

Fearlessly, Austrella raised her chin and returned his question. “What are *you* doing? It’s hard to believe that the father I loved, whom I thought was so good, is actually blinded by hunger for power.”

“Hunger for power?” His eyes grew wide in incredulity. “Is that what you think this is? Hunger for power? Really, Ella? Is that what you think of your own papa? Are you blind? Don’t you see what the dark prince took from us?”

Her frustration reached its peak, and she turned away from her papa furiously. She strode towards a table at the center of the room and mounted it. She could see everyone from the tabletop, and their eyes were glued to her; some were shocked, some confused, and some suspicious.

“Prince Liven is not a dark prince! No one can confirm what people say he did, because they’re just rumors! I’ve spent all these days with him, and I’ve learned the truth. I’ve seen who he truly is! He didn’t usurp the throne! He didn’t invade the kingdom. He claimed what is rightfully his! He is the rightful heir to the throne, the descendant of King—”

“What?” Truficas’ voice thundered. “Who told you this rubbish?” His shout echoed throughout the room, causing the people to voice their disagreement as well.

“Silence!” Austrella cried, and at her command, the room fell into silence again. “What I’m telling you is the truth! My papa knows the truth; the royal family has always known that there’s a rightful heir out there—”

“Ella,” Truficas called her warningly, a clear sign for her to stop.

Austrella ignored him. “My family is not the rightful royalty because we’re *not* the Catsimoor family. Did you know? Our kingdom was named after the last name of the first king—Catsimoor! And his descendants are the rightful heirs to the throne, the true rulers! You might have heard that the Catsimoor family line ended when King Gabe died in the war, but no! He had married a commoner in secret, something his parents were against, and his wife was with child—his child! She confronted the king’s parents, but they rejected her because she was a commoner!

“They threatened her to keep it a secret and sent her away! She gave birth to King Gabe’s son, the rightful heir to the throne. King Gabe’s parents had told this secret to King Everard, who was chosen by the court to become the next king, believing that King Gabe had no heir. King Everard passed down this secret to his generations and even my papa knows it! King Gabe’s son passed it down his family as well, but they kept it hidden for the sake of their safety until three brothers—”

“That is not true!” Travis interjected, exchanging a meaningful glance with her silent father. “King Gabe had no heir. He was not married.”

Austrella withheld a snort. “Where is your proof?”

“Where is *your* proof?” her uncle countered.

“King Everard’s diary. It was passed down for generations, and it’s still in the castle! It’s all written there, and you, Papa,” she looked directly at her father, “you know it. You can’t deny it, because I know you know it.” Then she turned to the people. “Liven is from King Gabe’s lineage, and that’s why King Truficas executed his three brothers when they confronted him with the truth!”

Gasps broke out from the crowd and they exchanged shocked glances, before their eyes eventually turned to Truficas, who was rubbing his chin, gazing down.

Austrella glanced at him. “You executed them because you knew that the throne rightfully belonged to them, and you sent your knights to Liven’s house to kill him and his father, didn’t you? To finish the Catsimoor bloodline.”

Truficas lifted his eyes and met hers. His gaze was cold. He walked forward, turning to face the people. “Yes, my clever daughter is right. The dark prince is the descendant of King Gabe, and since his brothers are no more, he is the rightful heir to the throne,” he admitted shamelessly, still unwavering. “I did kill his brothers when they came to take over the kingdom because their intentions were dark! They planned to use dark magic to destroy Catsimoor, to turn it into a place of dark magic, and I had to stop them to save and protect our kingdom! I did it for you, and your children. I did it for my people because I will not let any harm befall them. King Gabe’s descendants have always been against us because we are protecting you from them; they want to rule with evil in Catsimoor! Will you ever agree with that? Will you let anyone destroy our people and make this kingdom a land of dark magic? Will you let evil come take over your land and destroy your children?”

The people responded vehemently with “No!” Their protests filled the room.

“They had no dark intentions!” Austrella disagreed fervently. “They didn’t even have powers. Liven is the only one born with powers in the Catsimoor family. They didn’t even come for the throne; they only wanted to make themselves known! They were innocent and you executed them! And Liven, he didn’t come to attack the palace or take over the throne. He came to save his brothers, thinking they were held captive. But when he found out his brothers had been executed just that morning, it was such a shock that he couldn’t bear it. The anger and grief were what made him attack! Who wouldn’t? Who could stay calm when their family has been killed?” Her words challenged the narrative her father had presented.

The atmosphere was tense, and her body was becoming increasingly heated.

Truficas glared at his fearless daughter. “You are taking his side now? You’re with the dark prince now? What I did was for the good of my people, and I always will. But you, are you blinded by the lies he told you? We cannot let him live, after all he has done. Ella, don’t you understand, he ruined our lives and we have to kill—”

“I love him!”

The whole room crept into a pin-drop silence. Everyone seemed to be utterly stunned by her confession. Then slowly, whispers broke out and her uncle as shouting something, saying loving him was a sin, but Austrella couldn't concentrate on his words.

"What?" her father asked. "I cannot believe this! What nonsense are you speaking? How could you, after he ruined all of our lives! Perhaps the throne is rightfully his, but what about the lives we lost? He killed your own brother, Austrella! My son, the crown prince of Catsimoor, and—"

"So I am dead?"

A voice interrupted Truficas.

Austrella turned her gaze towards the entrance and met with Adam's, who wore a dramatically stunned expression. All eyes turned to him, including their parents.

"Ella, you didn't tell me I'm a ghost! But... but you touched me, you *felt* me. If I'm dead and only a ghost, how can you possibly feel me?" Adam asked, feigning perfect confusion and shock.

Her lips ached to smile.

"No, Adam, you're not a ghost, because Prince Liven was kind enough not to kill the son of the man who had executed his three brothers."

Intense shock filled the room and their mother gasped. "Adam?" she asked and turned to Austrella, hands over her mouth. "I-is that... is that really him?"

Austrella nodded.

"B-but we thought..."

"How is this possible?" Truficas asked, his eyes enlarging in disbelief. "Is that really you, my son?"

Adam scratched the back of his neck sheepishly. "Oh man, you don't recognize me, huh? Well, if I have shaved, you might have recognized me at least a bit. Can anybody get me a razor?"

Shocked whispers filled the room as everyone gaped at the prince, rooted to their spots. Their parents moved to him slowly, with Truficas muttering incredulously, "You... you do look like me."

"Of course, I do," Adam said. "Because I'm your son, and I'm alive. But what did you mean by *how is this possible*? It's just like how the entire kingdom believed you three were dead but you are not. Neither am I. Next time, do not believe

anything without proof, because look at me, I'm not dead. Not a ghost. I'm alive, here in the flesh and I've been alive all these years."

Austrella watched her parents as they approached their presumably dead son and hugged him. Averting her eyes, she saw Aquila standing in a corner of the room; her jaw dropped as she gaped at Adam who had lied to her that he was a secret knight.

After giving her parents a minute to reunite with Adam, Austrella turned to the people and continued her speech. "There, you see, Prince Adam, is alive! Prince Liven could've—"

"Ella!" Truficas interrupted, marching over to her. "I need to talk with you in private. Now." His tone left no room for argument. Besides, she had also wanted to talk with him privately.

"Of course." She stepped down from the table and Truficas grabbed her elbow, dragging her with him. She flinched at his reckless grip, taken aback.

He guided her out of the underground chamber. They reached the ladder. He climbed up and she followed him. Once in the manor room, he said, "We need to find a more private place to talk."

He led her to what appeared to be a guest room and gestured her in. She walked into the elegant guest room and turned around when she heard the door close.

Her eyes widened.

Truficas had not entered. He was locking her in.

"Papa!" Austrella rushed to the closed doors and pulled at the knob, but it didn't budge. "Papa, open the door!" she cried furiously, banging on the door. "No, no, no! Open the door!"

"I'm sorry, Ella, because I'm *not* sorry. I will let you out only when the dark prince is dead." With those unforgiving, cold words, she heard his footsteps leave.

Panic coursed through her veins at the realization that her own father had locked her in. Because she knew the truth. Because he knew that, her words could turn the people against him.

"Open the door! Someone, please, open the door!" Her trembling fingers gripped the doorknob, trying to force it open. Her disbelief turned into fear.

Liven! Her mind screamed. He was in utter danger, and she needed to go and inform him. She needed to save him. Her head raced frantically with worry and fear.

Tears welled up in her eyes as she banged on the door, her voice growing more frantic as she cried for help. Her fists ended up aching after several tries to break down the door.

Austrella could only think of Liven as she pounded on the door with all her might. But her attempts were fruitless.

She had to do something and get out.

Her blood boiled in pure anger towards her father, so that she wanted to destroy everything she saw around her.

If anyone dared to lay a hand on her Liven...

Austrella scanned the room for something useful and her gaze fell upon a chair. She immediately grabbed it and swung it against the door forcefully. She grew increasingly furious at each attempt and the swinging became more forceful so that the legs of the chair broke.

She screamed in frustration, throwing away the chair finally. Tears streamed down her face as she continued to scream and sob, her voice echoing in the room.

Yet, no one helped her.

Austrella was trapped and helpless, and her sobs grew as she thought of her Liven. She couldn't lose him. There was no way to break the curse, but she wouldn't let anyone kill him before the curse did. And when the curse does run its course, she would die as well.

She could not live without him.

Austrella tried to break the doorknob, but her attempts were in vain. She tried to break the door again but it was not possible.

How could he, her own father, do this to her?

She paced back and forth; rubbing her aching temples as she desperately sought a way to escape. However, after a long time of sobbing, screaming, trying to break down the door, she grew so exhausted that she ended up curling on the floor, silently crying.

As hours dragged on, and the sun began its ascent, Austrella's anxiety escalated. Fear and helplessness gnawed at her.

She glanced out of the closed window, but since the height from the window to the ground was substantial, jumping down was not an option.

Several minutes passed. Just when she decided to take down the curtains, the bed sheet, and every cloth she could find together, and knot them into a rope to escape over the balcony, she heard the unmistakable sound of the door unlocking.

Austrella gasped, and her heart leaped with hope. She turned to the door as it swung open.

Her rescuer was none other than her beloved brother.

He stood at the doorway, his presence like a sudden ray of light in her darkest moment. "Adam!" Austrella cried and rushed to him.

Adam stepped forward and caught her in his arms as she squeezed him into a tight hug. A sob escaped her lips.

"It's okay; I've got you, alright? I've got you, pumpkin," he crooned in her ear, stroking her hair soothingly.

"Oh, Adam, I thought I was stuck, I-I thought..." She pulled away from the hug, tears running down her face.

"It's all right." Adam wiped away her tears tenderly. "You know, someone just had to use their brain in the correct way." He smiled. "If I had revealed that I'm on Liven's side, don't you think I would be locked in here with you, with no way out and no chance to escape? But hey, thanks. I used my brain and played really nice, so I could come and save my little sister."

Amidst her tears, she smiled in gratitude before hugging him again, only to pull away quickly and bombard him with questions. "Where's Papa? Did they leave? Oh please, tell me the people didn't agree! Did they? When did they leave? I need to go and inform Liven! I promised to be back in the morning—"

"We have to hurry." Adam grabbed her hand, urgency lacing in his voice. "Yes, they left, just now. I came to find you as soon as they did. If we leave now, we can get there in time and inform him. Come on."

They rushed out of the room. Holding on to her brother's hand, a glimmer of hope and confidence sparked in Austrella like a reminder that she was not alone on this road.

"Father mentioned another group of fighters coming from the town, and since Father and others have only left now, we cannot take the road. They would

definitely stop us if they see us.”

“Then we will take the woods,” she said as they hurried through a hallway. “And—oh!” She gasped, coming to an abrupt halt that made Adam stop as well. “We can use the secret passageway to get inside the palace. I mean, even if we do reach the palace after them, it doesn’t change the fact that they will see us and could capture us easily. So, we will take the secret passageway from the woods that will take us straight inside.”

Adam’s eyes widened. “I had no idea there’s a secret passageway in the woods to the castle.” He seemed to find it thrilling.

Austrella ignored him with such seriousness as she said, “We need to bring a lamp with us. It’s deadly dark in there.” *And we can expect a deadly wizard, too.*

They hurried through the manor, ignoring everyone they crossed paths with. Adam grabbed a lamp mounted on a wall as they passed by.

“Ella!” a voice shouted behind them in surprise.

If it wasn’t for the familiarity in the young female voice, Austrella wouldn’t have turned around. There, behind them, a distance away, stood her dear friend.

“Marilee.” She gasped.

Marilee’s eyes were wide with shock. “Oh you, Ella! I’ve been waiting to see you! I cannot believe you came here but did not seek me out! Why, you even left without a goodbye!”

Austrella, panting from her hurried escape, replied urgently, “I’m really, really sorry! I wanted to come to you, but I was locked in a room! I promise to tell you everything later, but right now, I need to go! It’s really urgent!” She turned on her heel to run away.

“Oh, could you please spread the news that,” Adam chimed in quickly, “Prince Adam is alive and that this is Princess Austrella? Well, thank you very much.”

Every second counted. Austrella pulled him with her impatiently as she hurried off. They rushed out of the manor, headed to the stables, and saddled two horses hastily. Then they set off.

Austrella rode her horse into the woods near the road and Adam followed. Her horse quickened the speed and raced through the snowy woods. She glanced over her shoulder to find Adam not far behind, his horse keeping pace.

Reaching the spot where the trapdoor of the secret passageway was located, she halted her horse and dismounted. Adam followed suit. She cleared the snow covering the trapdoor with her leather boot, revealing the wooden door beneath and placed her palm against the door. Austrella uttered the secret phrase and the door slid open. Holding the lamp, she climbed down the ladder first.

It took more than ten minutes to emerge from the secret passageways. Adam asked several questions on the way, but she had to dismiss them, promising to answer later. When they emerged into the music room, Adam paused to look around, but she pulled him with her as she hurried out.

Austrella could hear a clock ticking in her head. She just wanted to reach Liven before anyone else did.

They traversed several hallways and paused only when they reached a small balcony that overlooked the palace grounds. Adam hurried out to the balcony and she followed him.

“Oh, my goodness.” Her eyes widened at the scene below. Countless people were fighting with swords, and from such height, she couldn’t recognize anyone.

However, what surprised her the most was that the guards and the knights were fighting against Travis’ people, fighting for Liven, protecting him. After seeing a few royal guards at the meeting, she assumed everyone was against him. She was wrong. Only a few had turned against him, the rest remained loyal even when they didn’t know the truth.

“We need to find Liven,” she said urgently, and retreated from the balcony swiftly.

Adam kept up with her pace. “Where could he be? Do you suppose he’s down there fighting?”

Her heart clenched in fright. “I hope not.”

As they raced through the palace halls, they crossed paths with a worried-looking manservant. Austrella stopped to address him. “Have you seen Prince Liven? Do you know where he is?”

“I-I am not sure, my lady,” the man stammered. “The last time I saw him, he was heading for the forbidden wing.”

“Thank you.” She breathed before rushing forward. She heard Adam calling out, “I’m Prince Adam, by the way!” before he followed her.

Austrella ran for the east wing, desperate to find Liven. Holding her brother's hand tight, she neared the wing, only to be halted by a familiar voice behind them.

"Stop them both!"

Their uncle was only a short distance away from them, with two soldiers on either side who moved forward at his command.

Her panic surged.

Adam stepped in front of her immediately, drawing out his sword and shielding her. "You go on, I will handle them," he told her.

Austrella nodded reluctantly and dashed to the east wing, calling Liven's name. Her eyes fell on the door of the room where the rose was. She halted, slowly neared the door, and pushed it open.

The sight of the very few petals remaining made her breath hitch and her eyes wet with tears. There was no solution to the curse, and when the last petal fell, he would die.

Austrella averted her eyes, blinking back her tears before walking away. Her worry grew increasingly frantic as she kept calling him and received no answer.

"Liven, where—" She paused when she heard arguing voices coming from ahead.

Her fears were confirmed. Someone had reached him before she could.

Austrella followed the direction of voices and halted in front of an open room. She froze at the entrance.

Liven and Truficas faced each other with swords in their hands, and they argued fiercely. Her father stood close to the wide and large balcony in the room, the sword in his hand poised as if ready to strike Liven down.

"How could you say that after what you have done?" Liven's stern voice filled the room with such fierceness. "All the lives lost were because of what you did. If you had not killed my brothers, none of this would have happened in the first place. But no, you feared you would lose the throne and executed my brothers, which led me to do whatever I did!"

Truficas sneered with anger. "How easily are you claiming yourself innocent after the bloodshed you cause, which is not my—"

"Stop it!" Austrella's cry pierced the air as she rushed into the room with sheer fear in her eyes.

Both men turned to her immediately, visibly shocked by her presence.

Liven's eyes widened and his expression shifted from anger to surprise. His lips parted as he saw her. Their eyes locked, an unspoken connection passing between them. His gaze spoke words that only she could understand.

But her father was unrelenting. He charged at Liven with his sword, but Liven was fast and blocked it.

"Papa, you have to stop this!" she cried, but he paid no heed to her as he kept fighting fiercely against Liven. Both men engaged in a fierce sword fight, their blades clashing, echoes resounding through the room.

Her horror intensified as she watched their fight. "Stop! Papa, stop it! You must stop now!" Her cries seemed to fall on deaf ears as he paid her no heed.

With every clash of steel, her anxiety grew. Austrella continued to beg her father to stop this madness, but he seemed oblivious to her pleas.

One wrong move was enough for either one to get hurt. She didn't worry about her father as she knew Liven would never hurt him, but her father... he didn't want to just *hurt* Liven.

He wanted to kill him.

Suddenly, Liven, who was quick and purposeful, in a sudden, unexpected move, disarmed Truficas, sending his sword spinning backward and falling to the end of the balcony. Only then did her panic cease a little.

Stunned and now frightened, Truficas took a step back, distancing himself from Liven. He eyed his weapon but seemed reluctant to retrieve it.

Liven held his sword and pointed it at him. "If you think I'm going to kill you, then you are wrong. I am not like you. I will never intentionally take away a life. The lives that were taken away because of my attack on the palace were unintentional. I did not plan to kill anyone. Not even you, even now. Besides, you're the father of the woman I love and I wish no harm to befall you." He lowered his sword and backed away slowly.

Austrella watched him breathlessly, tears wetting her eyes. When he turned and met her eyes, she saw his love for her in those ocean eyes. Warmth stirred within her. She couldn't contain herself anymore; she wanted to reach him, throw her arms around him, and tell him that she loved him.

She strode to him, eyes locked with his, desperation filling her lungs. But when she had neared him, a movement caught her attention. Her eyes jerked to

her father.

With a swift, merciless motion, Truficas retrieved his sword from the floor and threw it towards Liven.

Panic gripped her heart, and without a single thought, Austrella threw herself in front of Liven.

The sword pierced through the air and struck her instead, tearing into her body just below her chest.

The excruciating pain that coursed through her body was indescribable. It was as if a million burning needles had seared through her, and her gasp of agony echoed around the room.

Austrella heard Liven shouting and her father saying something as well, but for a moment, all the noises seemed muffled. The next thing she knew was that she was falling, as quickly as the sword hit her. All strength was crushed out of her and she fell backward, but before she reached the ground, two strong arms caught her.

She felt as if her world was collapsing around her.

The pain in her chest was unbearable, and every heartbeat sent waves of agony through her body. Her vision swam, but she made out Liven's anguished expression as he lowered her to the floor along with him, his hand holding her head.

"Ella, Ella, no, no, no!" Liven shouted in agony, in pure fright, and his face was drenched in fear, panic, shock, and more than what she could make out. "No, no, don't—Ella."

The sight of tears running down his face broke her heart, and she wanted to tell him something, or at least call his name, but her breaths came in ragged gasps and she couldn't form words.

She heard her father crying her name, and he must've run to her—she couldn't see anything other than Liven's face—because Liven turned with an inhuman glare and lifted his palm swiftly. Austrella heard a faint sound of her papa thrown backward.

The backlash of Liven's powers sent himself flying backwards, away from her. As his hand that supported her head left, it hit the ground faintly.

She winced.

Tears blurred her vision and her trembling fingers instinctively went to the sword. She felt the cold metal against her skin and the warmth of her own blood flowing around it. She choked back a cry of pain.

Then the realization hit her.

She was dying.

Each second was sucking out her life.

“L-Liven!” she let out a strangled cry.

“I’m here, I’m here.” Liven rushed to her side and lifted her from the cold floor, cradling her in his arms, her head on his lap. “I’m here, Ella, just... just stay with me, okay? Stay. Stay with me—don’t... don’t leave.” Tears streamed down his face, the disbelief and shock lingering in his eyes. “Don’t leave me, Ella, don’t... no, no, no, I need to—I need to get you to the—”

“Liven.” Austrella gasped, and then groaned in pain, squeezing her eyes shut. “Liven.” She sobbed.

“I’m here, I’m with you, I will take you to the physician, you’re going to stay with me, you’re—”

“N-no.” Her voice came out with a groan of pain. Her breaths were shallow. It was as if her very life was being swept away with each passing second. “All... all that the enchanter said... was a lie,” she managed to utter. “There’s n-nothing... to break the curse.” She gasped for breath before managing to continue, “So, I’m just... just going before it takes... you. Can’t... live... without you.”

Liven’s body shook with his sobs; his face was drenched in tears and his grip on her tightened, holding her closer. “No, no, no! No, please, don’t—don’t go, don’t leave—I love you! I love you, so don’t—Stay with me!”

Her heart couldn’t break any more. Tears streamed down her eyes. “E-even if I stay... you would leave me... wouldn’t you? I’m just... going before you...”

“Hold on, love, hold on, you will—”

“Liven,” she whimpered. As the pain intensified and her head became dizzy, she knew her time was ending. “I-I haven’t told you this... something... I feel like I lived my whole... whole life to tell you...” She felt her voice slipping away, but then she barely managed to say, “I... I love you, Liven, I love you. I love you more than anything. This... this heart will stop any moment now, but... it will never stop... loving you.”

Through her fading consciousness, she saw Liven's reaction. His already heartbroken cries intensified. Then, determination crossed his face. "I'm not letting you go alone. No, I will *never* let you go alone. I'm coming with you."

Liven reached for his fallen sword and pointed its sharp edge to his chest, all while glancing down at her with determination. Austrella's eyes widened in horror and she tried to speak. "N-no—"

"A breath without you is not the breath I want to breathe. You are the beat of my heart, the breath in my lungs. There's no life without you, Ella. You are the very essence of my existence." His voice was resolute and he leaned his face down on hers, kissing her lips gently with a whisper of, "I love you."

Then, without hesitation, Liven drove the sword into his heart, sealing their fates together even in death.

CHAPTER 20 | RESTORED

Austrella's eyes began to flutter close. Her world dimmed. The agony from the searing sword was now a distant sensation as she slowly slipped away.

But through blurriness that descended her sight, a brilliant light pierced her senses. Initially, it was a mere glow, and then, with unexpected swiftness, her vision cleared. Her gaze fell on a radiant, golden light emanating from Liven's chest where he had staked his sword.

The light was unlike anything she had ever seen—intense, ethereal, and pure. Her widened eyes locked onto Liven, her confusion and wonder mirroring his.

The golden light grew brighter, as if a sun itself had taken residence within Liven. The sword was wrenched from his chest, falling a distance away. The light intensified and its tendrils spread outward from his chest, enveloping her.

A gasp of pain escaped her lips as the sword pulled out from her own body. The pain was real, but it vanished as soon as the sword was out, as if it had never been there before.

The light grew too intense for her eyes to take in, and Austrella moved away from Liven's lap. She touched below her chest where the sword had pierced into, but the wound had closed; even her dress where the weapon had torn through. It was as if she hadn't been injured at all. Not even a drop of blood or the stain remained.

The light radiated around the room like sunrise and she felt her strength returning, allowing her to sit upright. Her awe-filled eyes turned on Liven as the light radiated from him. Then, the all-encompassing light began to retreat, fading like the rays of a setting sun. It condensed back into Liven's chest, subsiding completely.

Austrella's eyes lowered to his chest. There was no trace of injury on him either. No lingering bloodstain or wounded flesh. Her awed gaze met his. Their

eyes locked for a brief moment, emotions swirling between them—wonder, confusion, shock, disbelief, and much more.

“You’re alright.” Liven breathed in wonder, moving closer to her. His trembling hands cupped her face, unfathomable relief welling up in his eyes. “Oh, Ella, you’re all right.”

Austrella stared at him in wide-eyed wonder. She leaned closer, her eyes roaming all over his face as she held it. “So are you—*How?*”

“My curse is broken,” he whispered, and dropped his hands from her before rising to his feet and surveying the room. Austrella watched incredulously as he raised a palm, and a flower vase nearby floated into the air.

She held her breath.

There was no backfire, no sign of his powers turning against him.

Austrella couldn’t help but gasp, and when he turned to her, her astonishment was mirrored in his eyes.

“My curse is broken,” Liven declared.

“Really? How?”

“It is,” he said, moving a hand to his chest. “I felt it. I *feel* it.”

“But how? I mean, the curse was supposed to be broken by—”

“Love.”

Austrella blinked. “What?”

A gentle smile graced Liven lips as he offered his hands to her and lifted her to her feet. “*Love*, Ella. I see now. Love is *the* most powerful thing in the world.”

Her lips parted in shock as the weight of his words bore down on her. Tears tugged at the corner of her eyes. For a moment, she was speechless.

Liven looked deeply into her eyes. “I found love. You, my love, are the one I was meant to find, not any magical object. *Our* love. You love me, and I love you. And it’s the most powerful thing of all. Our love broke the curse.”

The truth resonated deep within her soul, reaffirming their love as an unbreakable force, the most powerful thing.

Austrella’s heart soared with untraceable joy and love, tears of sheer happiness flowing from her eyes. She had no words. She threw her arms around him with a happy sob.

His arms wrapped around her, holding her tight. His fingers stroked her hair and he pressed a kiss into it. “You’re alright,” Liven whispered, as if assuring

himself this was all real.

"Yes, and you're alright too—we're alive... we didn't—I thought it was the end," Austrella mumbled against his shoulder and buried her face in the crook of his neck, clinging onto him tight. "I-I thought it was hopeless, I thought..." She pulled back with the desire to see his face.

"Oh Ella." He rested his forehead against hers. "I *love* you." His eyes were a whirlpool of emotions she couldn't recognize, and they darkened just before he closed the distance and crashed his lips to hers. Her head spun as she surrendered to the sweetness of his lips, all thoughts melting away as she melted into his arms with no space left between them.

When they pulled apart breathless, the realization that they weren't alone in the room dawned on her when her father's voice reached her ears, quiet and tender.

"Ella."

Austrella turned around hastily. Truficas was only rising to his feet from the fall Liven had caused him. His eyes were wide with shock, as he surely had witnessed everything. Tears had filled his eyes.

"Papa." Austrella stepped forward.

"Ella... you're... healed. You're completely... healed." His eyes trailed down to the spot where his sword had struck her. "You were dying... because of *me*..." Guilt and regret were visible in his eyes. "I hurt you," he said in sheer disbelief, as if the realization was slowly dawning upon him. "I almost killed you."

Her heart twisted at her father's teary eyes and broken voice. She took another step forward. "But I'm healed now. I'm completely healed."

Truficas stared at her and seemed to struggle finding words. His face was pale. "But you were hurt, almost died because of me. Why—why did you come in front of it? I almost—"

"Because I love him," Austrella interjected in one breath. More tears gathered in her eyes. "I love Liven, and I won't let anyone hurt him. I love him, Papa. He's everything to me, and he loves—"

"I saw it," Truficas said skeptically. "I saw everything, but... how is it—how did it happen? The light, the curse..."

"You said there's no single most powerful thing, but there is. We found it. Love. Love is *the* most powerful thing, and it saved us. We cannot live without

each other. We would sacrifice ourselves for each other, and our love broke the curse.” Austrella stole a glance at her prince over her shoulder and turned to her father with a smile. But he remained pale with lingering disbelief.

Her father’s eyes then flickered to Liven and back to her. “He... he staked himself when you... you were dying,” he said, shock lacing his words. He stared at her with more tears in his eyes. “He can’t live without you,” he spoke as if in realization.

Austrella’s eyes misted with unshed tears. “And I can’t live without him either,” she confessed in a soft whisper.

Truficas continued to stare at his daughter before he spoke again. “He loves you.”

Austrella’s tears spilled over. Her lips trembled as she smiled, and nodded. “And I love him.”

“I have... I have never seen anything like this before.” Truficas remained rooted to the spot, his words resonating the depths of his shock. “I’ve never seen a love like this before... Do not get me wrong, Ella, I do love your mother but... not like what I just saw... I never thought love was... *this* powerful.” He glanced at the both of them as his own tears spilled over. “Ella, I am sorry, I am truly sorry for the wrong choices I made.”

Austrella approached him hurriedly, grasping his hands. “Papa, it’s okay—”

“You were right about me. I was indeed hungry for power. I have always been; which was why I did not think twice before declaring the execution of his brothers. You are right, they did not come for the throne and they had no intention of ruling with evil in Catsimoor. I lied. I lied to keep the people at my side. I did not care about the truth or rights, as I only wanted to reclaim the throne. And your words, the truth you revealed, had them turn against me, but I lied again, lied that one of the enchanters said that he and his father are planning on destroying Catsimoor completely because they don’t like it anymore, that they want to build a new empire.

“That had the people come with me. But...” Truficas squeezed her hands as he held onto them. “I apologize for all the wrong acts I have ever made, I was blinded until... until I saw *it*. I promise you, my daughter, I will make things right. Even if they shall turn against me, I will tell them the truth and clear out his name.” His eyes slid to Liven. “And I’m willingly giving up the crown to him.”

"I don't want the crown," Liven said, taking a step forward. "I don't want the throne. You can take it. I only want your daughter."

Truficas shook his head. "No, the throne is yours. The people need a good king, and I am certainly not that. Moreover, the throne is rightfully yours. King Gabe would have wanted his descendant on his throne if he ever knew he had one. I was blinded with greed, which led me to the unjust actions I have done, but now... I truly regret all my wrong choices. I am aware that I cannot bring the dead to life, but there are things I want to make right, that I *can* make right." Then he stepped forward to Liven. "I'm genuinely asking forgiveness for blaming you. Deep down, all these years, I have always known it was my fault. Whatever happened in the past and present is my fault. It will not happen again. And, my daughter is already yours."

A serene smile graced Liven features. "And you have my forgiveness. We can bury the past and have a new start."

A small smile rose on Truficas' face and he nodded. "I'm forever grateful for your forgiveness and I promise I will not ruin anything this time, not after the veil on my eyes has been lifted by witnessing your love for my daughter." Then he approached him and stuck out a hand, which Liven accepted immediately. "I'm Lord Truficas."

Austrella's eyes widened in shock, and so did Liven's.

"I will not be known as king from now on, for I'm willingly giving my crown to you. Besides, your father is already the king. Speaking of which, I would like to have a word with him as well."

Before Liven could answer, Austrella interjected. "Does that mean I'm not a princess anymore?" She knitted her eyebrows together sharply.

Her favorite ocean eyes turned to her, and he smirked, as if sensing the displeasure that hinted in her words. "Of course not, you will always be my rebellious princess."

She couldn't help but break into a smile, satisfied.

"I will leave you both alone. There is a fight that need to stop and news to announce. If you will excuse me, I must go now."

Austrella watched as her father walked out of the room. As soon as he disappeared from her line of sight, she and Liven strode towards to each other.

Liven gathered her in his arms desperately, and she smiled wide, pressing her cheek against his chest.

“Tell me this is really real.”

“How about I tell you this is *absolutely* real?” Liven murmured, placing a tender kiss on her forehead.

Austrella chuckled. “I just didn’t expect Papa to be... I thought he wouldn’t—but oh, thank the Creator, everything is over now! And the curse... you don’t know how hopeless I was when I learned that the enchanter who cursed you knew there’s no such thing as *the* most powerful thing. I felt the world fall apart.”

“And the world did fall apart when...” Liven inhaled sharply. “When the sword struck you. Never in my life have I seen something so terrible, something that tore my life apart. It felt like my heart was being torn out of my chest.”

Austrella craned her neck to meet his haunted eyes, pressing her chin against his chest. “You know, Liven, when I realized I was going to lose you so soon, I made a decision. That I would not live without you. Just like you staked yourself, I decided to do it to myself when I was going to lose you. Because, Liven, I can’t... I can’t live without you.” Her eyes glistened and a lump formed in her throat. “I love you. I love you, and I love you! I could never stop saying that, because I *love* you. So much that I cannot live without you.”

Liven’s eyes shone with tears and he leaned in, a whirlpool of emotions etched on his beautiful features. “And I love you.” He kissed her forehead. “I love you more.” His lips grazed her cheek in a tantalizing way. “I love you the most.” He kissed her eyelids before stealing a kiss on her lips. “I love you beyond my words could ever convey, and I could tell you forever that I love you, in every single breath.”

“And I would tell you in every heartbeat that I love you, too.” She smiled before a frown tugged it down. “Do you think they will be waiting for us?”

“I don’t care,” he said huskily. “Because all I want now is to kiss you senseless and make you forget your name.”

“You can make me forget my name, but I will never forget yours, because you made me wait insanely curious to learn your name for me not to forget. And I never will.”

Liven smirked. “And was it not worth waiting for?”

She grinned. “More than I ever expected.”

Liven kissed her with a deep hunger and urgency, as if he couldn't bear to be away from her lips for a moment longer. His lips were warm and insistent, moving against hers with a desperate need, each kiss telling her how deeply he loved her. His love bathed her. As she returned the kiss, her hands found their way to his chest, fingers clutching the fabric of his shirt.

He cradled her face in his hands gently but firmly and deepened the kiss. She met his hunger with equal fervor, and he pulled her closer, leaving no space between them. Their bodies pressed against each other, and the heat of their passion grew with each passing second. It was as though time itself had stopped around them, making her forget what the world was.

"Hey!"

Austrella pulled away, startled. Liven, too, drew back, and their eyes snapped towards the entrance. There stood Prince Adam, hands on his hips, an amused, slightly mocking expression on his face.

"Like I said before, romance when you're alone, not in front of me," he quipped.

"We *were* alone!" Austrella narrowed her eyes fiercely at her brother. "You're the one who intruded! How unfair of you—" She retorted defiantly before pulling Liven down to her and kissing him soundly.

Liven smiled against her lips, kissing her back. "Rebellious princess, indeed," he muttered when they broke the kiss.

"Alright, alright, I'm sorry for the interruption!" Adam conceded with a laugh. "But I was just worried about what had happened. I saw Father going down, saying he has something to make *right*. What did happen?"

Liven exchanged a soft glance with Austrella before turning to him. "Yes, the world itself shifted, Adam, in case if you haven't noticed."

Adam's lips turned up amusedly. "No, I didn't quite feel it, mate. Perhaps I'm the only one who has not shifted along? What happened?"

"Well..." Austrella pulled away from her prince and strolled to her brother with a rising smile. "Papa is guilty. He regrets his actions. He has finally come to understand it after what he witnessed." She held onto the hope that the change in her father was genuine.

Adam blinked. "What did he witness?"

She exchanged a smile with Liven before saying, "We will tell you later. I think we should go and see what he is going to say. But are you alright? Uncle didn't hurt you, did he?"

Adam chuckled with a shake of his head. "Of course not. He wouldn't. But hear this," he began, "only after I drew out my sword like a brave knight did I realize I haven't used it in ten years. I didn't remember the first thing about fighting."

"And?" she pressed, her eyes wide.

"And, I used my real weapon. I told them I'm Prince Adam."

Austrella laughed at his victorious tone. "I bet you told everyone on the way."

"Nah, Ella, I actually went to the battlefield and told them I'm Prince Adam, and ta-da! The fight stopped." He raised his arms in a triumphant gesture.

"I didn't know we have a battlefield here. Do we now?" Liven stepped forward, raising an eyebrow.

Adam smirked. "Didn't you know? The courtyard turned into a battlefield for a moment, but rest assured, I handled everything elegantly." He turned to Austrella, his expression shifting to a serious one. "Oh, and guess who came from the manor after us?"

"Who?"

"Aquila and Alondra."

"Oh, what? They're here?" Her eyes widened in surprise. She didn't get a chance to see Alondra, not as *Austrella*.

"As soon as they realized we had left, both of them sneaked out and came after us. You know, they both are mad at us. Aquila was and *is* incredibly mad at me for lying to her, and we kind of argued about it when you were all locked up —"

"Locked up?" Liven interjected, glancing between them confusedly. "Am I missing something?"

Austrella turned to him. "After I told the people at the meeting the truth about everything, Papa said he needed to talk and led me to a room and locked me up. Or else I would've come back earlier."

Liven's eyes widened and a sternness crossed his features. When he was about to say something, Adam chimed in, "Actually, Ella, that was absurd. How could you allow him to lock you up anyway?"

Austrella stared at her brother in uttermost disbelief. “You’re mental! I did not *allow* him. Who in their right mind would that? As always, since it is *ladies first*, he gestured me in, and when I did, he closed the door behind me and locked it. You have no idea how many hours I shouted, knocked, and tried everything to knock down the do—”

“Wait, you what?” Liven’s eyebrows furrowed, his voice quiet and eyes darkened.

She reached out and held his hand, reassuringly, “It’s okay. I was able to come here in time, anyway.”

“So, how did you get out?”

“That.” Adam grinned mischievously. “You can guess easily. The big brother came to the baby sister’s rescue.”

Austrella blushed in embarrassment before narrowing her eyes to slits playfully. “For your information, dear brother, I’m not a baby anymore—in case your eyes are deceiving you.”

Adam rolled his eyes. “Anyway, you should not keep our cousins waiting. They are looking for you everywhere and have headed toward the library. They asked me, but I didn’t tell them where you were. But hey, do not tell them I knew you were here. We have poured enough fuel on them. Try not to start the fire.”

They exited the east wing. Austrella headed towards the library’s direction to find her cousins and promised Liven to meet him downstairs shortly. He agreed and encouraged her not to keep her cousins waiting.

They parted ways.

However, just as she was about to take the turn to the library’s hallway, a rough hand clasped over her mouth from behind, stopping her.

Her eyes grew wide in panic.

Austrella attempted to shout, but the hand stifled her cries. She tried to pry the hand away, but failed. Her attempt to turn around to see the attacker also failed as another strong hand held her elbow, keeping her in her place.

“Don’t make a noise,” a male voice said, his tone chillingly familiar. “If you make a noise, I swear, I will snap your neck.”

The hand uncovered her mouth slowly. Austrella gasped for breath as she stumbled a few steps forward, pulling herself away from the man. She spun around to face her assailant.

Liven's uncle stood before her with a wicked smile on his face, his hands clasped together before him. The wizard, the one she had encountered in the secret of the secret passageway was here.

Horror took over her.

Here she was thinking that everything was over finally and the peace had fallen upon them.

"You?" she managed to gasp.

"Surprised?" he asked, spreading his arms. "I was patiently waiting for you to come, and it looks like luck is indeed with me." His tone was quite calm.

Austrella took a cautious step back, her eyes fixed on the man before her, and then again, taking another step back.

"Now, now, step close. You are not allowed to go anywhere, and you're not allowed to make any noise," he warned.

"I know who you are." Austrella spoke carefully, her voice quivering slightly. "You're Liven's uncle, aren't you?"

The man's eyes flickered with a hint of surprise. "Clever. How did you figure that out?"

"I saw a portrait."

"Ah, I see."

"You were supposed to be dead," Austrella said. "Liven said you were dead. And—never mind. What are you doing here?"

A wide grin broke onto his face, looking rather ridiculous. "I'm so glad you asked. You know, I came here to take something of mine before I would leave, but then I found out that my nephew has stolen it. It is something so important to me, and I am simply here to get it back from him. However, I cannot approach him when there are several enchanters present, and I will not hesitate to admit that it is not safe for me. They know me, and do not like me. Therefore, to reveal myself to my nephew when my enemies are present without my weapon, it is not the best choice. So, that is where you are going to help me."

She scoffed. "Do you really expect me to help you?"

"Of course, I do," he said, unfazed by her reply. "Because I will kill you if you don't." He smiled. "Rest assured, you will have to do nothing. Simply come with me. I need to make my nephew come to me alone and hand over to me that which belongs to me. Oh, and to have a little chat with him before I wave

goodbye to Catsimoor as well. I cannot confront him here as I've already told you the reason. So, that is all. Nothing more. If I ask anything more of you, then you can kill me. And if you don't do as I want, then I will kill you."

Austrella stared at him with a heavy heart, unsure of what to do. Though she had put on a bold face, inside she was truly frightened by his presence. The events of her near-death experience by him played in her head, making her shudder. She knew she couldn't refuse, so she said, "Give me your word that you will let me go when Liven comes with your... your thing."

His smile widened. "I give you my word." He retrieved a piece of paper from the folds of his dark robe and dropped it on the floor beside him. "There, a letter for Liven to come to a certain place, which he does know so well, and hand over my belonging privately. He's not supposed to bring any enchanter with him. If he does, I will not hesitate to kill you."

Austrella gritted her teeth, reluctant to cooperate. "Fine." She snarled. "I'll come with you."

Liven's uncle led her to the music room and opened the secret passageway like an expert. When he took her to the secret of the secret passageway, she couldn't help but ask, "How do you know this passageway?" and spared a glare at him.

"Fortunately, Truficas had kept a map in his room hidden. I simply found it."

Austrella followed him through the tunnel reluctantly and out to the woods, barely holding back all the questions swirling in her mind. On her way, she kept thinking of Liven, wondering what he would think when she was nowhere to be found.

She was pulled out of her thoughts when she stepped out into the snowy woods and saw a carriage awaiting them. Tendrils of fear wrapped around her heart. "Where are you taking me to?" she demanded when he led her to the carriage.

"A place where Liven used to spend time to clear his mind before you came. Like I said before, do not worry, I will not harm my nephew's bride unless she disobeys me. You're simply the way to make Liven obey me and come here alone. Now, get in the carriage. Your prince charming will bring you back soon."

She clenched her fists. She hated this feeling of helplessness.

Austrella wanted to disobey because she was the rebellious princess, but she had no choice. She nodded, though her trust in this man was non-existent.

Austrella withheld her sigh of defeat and climbed into the carriage.

CHAPTER 21 | DEAL

The bouncing of the carriage was not pleasing.

Austrella had her arms folded across her chest with a scowl on her face, like an upset five-year-old.

When the carriage stopped, relief flooded through her veins, as sitting next to the evil uncle of her lover was anything but pleasant. She stepped out of the carriage after the man and found herself on a remote, snowy mountaintop. Confused, she looked around and saw a wooden cottage nestled amidst the pristine, snow-blanketed landscape with only one or two trees around, making it appear isolated.

The only flat area was the small patch of land where the cottage stood and a small yard before it. The roof was burdened with snow as was the ground. She turned back, glancing towards the way the carriage had climbed and the woods stretched below the small mountaintop. Her gaze fell upon a distant structure; the castle. A heavy breath escaped her. At least, she was not that far away.

“Whose house is this?” Austrella turned to the man, her eyes curious and cautious at once.

“No one’s in particular,” the man said, staring at the cottage with his hands on his hips. “Or, let’s call it now Liven’s. Before you, he used to come here often, probably because he needed a break from his unfeeling and dead-like father. Poor thing.”

Austrella knitted her eyebrows. “And how do you know that?”

He shrugged. “I just know. Therefore, do not worry; he will be here in no time. Now, come.” He pushed open the creaking door of the cottage and walked in.

Austrella stepped inside after him. She was met with a cloud of dust as he pulled out two dusty chairs and dusted them off. It was cold inside just like

outside, but the cold that bothered unpleasantly her was born out of fear and tension; she was trapped with him until Liven came.

Uncomfortably, she glanced around. Liven's uncle cleaned a dusty chair for her and invited her to sit, but she refused. She remained standing near the entrance, arms wrapped around herself.

"So, you are a wizard." Her voice was barely more than a whisper.

"Of course," he answered enthusiastically, his tone irritating her to the core. "But unfortunately, my magic comes from an object, a crystal, and without it, I do not have magic. Though I'm equally dangerous if I have my magic or not. Moreover, you see, that crystal is what your prince stole. It was kept hidden in my room, but I think he found it. I should have taken it with me when I left for the journey, but as you can imagine, it rather seemed pointless then since I cannot use the magic while keeping my form. If I did, the guards would have discovered my true form and the truth."

"Your form?" Austrella echoed, her eyebrows furrowing. "What do you mean? Wait, you were on a journey? Was it with King Leopold? He had left for a journey too."

An unsettling smile tugged at his lips. "The king? You mean..." He nonchalantly pulled out a silver locket attached to a silver chain from his robe. He wore it around his neck.

Within a blink of an eye, his features began to shift and morph into a new face. A familiar one.

Austrella gasped, stumbling back.

Before her stood no longer Liven's uncle, but his father, King Leopold.

Or rather, that was the form the wizard *took*.

Her breath caught in her throat as realization settled in—this man had the magic to shape-shift. Her jaw dropped. Her mind raced, and after a brief moment, she found her voice.

"What... where is King Leopold? What did you do to him?"

Liven's uncle, now in the guise of King Leopold, raised his hands in mock surrender. "Whoa, whoa, whoa, calm down, Princess *Austrella*." Amusement danced in his eyes. "And do not be shocked, I heard who you are when I arrived at the palace. Seems like everyone knows now. So, back to King Leopold. I didn't know you cared for him. First of all, there is no *King* Leopold. There once was a

Leopold, but not a king. He was never able to sit on the throne. He died two days after his sons did. Let's just say, I killed him years ago and took his form, masquerading as my own brother for all these ten years."

The weight of his words crashed down on her. Her horror was palpable. His smile grew sinister at her expression. Thoughts raced in her head.

Liven's uncle had killed his father...

He disguised himself as Liven's father for all these ten years and Liven didn't know...

He was not just a wizard, but also a master of deception and darkness.

"What—what on earth! You killed your own brother? You've been acting as Liven's father all these years? Why? I don't—"

"I shall explain everything to you when Liven arrives," he said, interrupting her as she bombarded him with questions. "I don't like to repeat myself, so do not do it. Let us wait for my little nephew." With those words, he removed the locket and reverted to his original appearance. The sight chilled her. "Oh, and by the way, remember the sudden heavy rain and the heavy snowfall after the rain? I did that. Fascinating, is it not? I was simply trying out my powers."

Austrella gaped at him in horror.

He dragged out a chair and sat before her with an air of absolute casualness, while she stood frozen in her spot.

A heavy silence settled between them as they waited for Liven. Austrella felt an ache in her heart, knowing that Liven's father had been dead for years and he had no idea. Her heart broke for him.

After a few minutes of awkward silence, she eventually perched on the chair he had offered. Though she kept her gaze fixed outside, she had a cautious eye on the wizard. He sat across from her, arms folded, facing the open door where the icy wind rushed in.

As each second ticked away, it became increasingly chilly.

"What's your name?" Austrella mustered the courage to ask, breaking the silence.

The man was surprised by her question. "You can call me Elandrinor. That is how I'm known. My given name is forgotten, just like the person I was before."

Time seemed to stretch endlessly, and it felt like Austrella was waiting for her prince for an eternity. Then, the unmistakable sound of hoofbeats reached her

ears, signaling the arrival of someone—she prayed it was her Liven.

Her heart raced in hope as she leaped to her feet and rushed to the entrance of the cottage. Her heart soared when she saw Liven approaching on a white horse. He looked regal and fierce, like a king on a mission. Their eyes found each other immediately.

“Liven!” she cried his name in desperation, hurrying out of the cottage.

“Ella!” Liven dismounted and rushed towards her side, catching her in his strong embrace as she threw herself towards him.

Her relief was unfathomable, as if being saved from a terrible fate.

“Ella, are you okay? Did he hurt you? How long have you been here?” He fired off his questions and showered her hair with kisses, a hand stroking her hair.

Austrella was relieved now. There was nowhere else in the world that made her feel more safe than in his arms. He was her home. “I’m alright. He didn’t hurt me.”

Liven let out a relieved breath and continued to stroke her hair. “Oh, thank the Creator. I was so worried about you.”

“Can we leave?” Austrella asked, her voice a desperate plea. “I was waiting for you. Did you bring the crystal?”

“Of course, I did. We will leave soon, I promise. Where is—”

“Ah, little nephew!” Elandrinor interrupted their reunion, and Austrella pulled away, turning to see the man leaning against the entrance. He smiled as if he hadn’t a care in the world. “Come on, come in, I’m sure you have plenty of questions for me.” He gestured inside.

“No, thank you,” Liven retorted. She turned to see his eyes holding a murderous glare for his uncle. “You want the crystal? Here, take it.” He retrieved a dark orange crystal that was the size of an apple and left her side to walk over to him. He passed it to Elandrinor, who received it gladly.

Liven returned to Austrella, pulling her back into his arms. “Let’s ge—”

“Come in, both of you,” Elandrinor called out, grabbing their attention. “Don’t you think you deserve an explanation?” His smile was careless.

Liven glared. “What explanation, you mean? That you killed my father and impersonated him all these years just to use me for your plans?”

Austrella’s eyes widened at the information. How did he know?

Elandrinor seemed to share the same question, shock etched his face for a brief moment. “Ah, so you know.”

“Of course, I did. My suspicions led me to explore the king’s room and I found the trapdoor by sensing your crystal’s powers. I found your diary, which held all the answers I sought. Now, be gone before my anger takes control,” Liven warned him gravely.

“When did you find it?” Austrella whispered to him.

“After you left for the meeting—”

“But I still do think you deserve some explanations,” Elandrinor chimed in. He seemed amused by Liven’s radiating anger.

“No—”

“Not even one question? Oh come on, *little* nephew, there are still more things that my diary didn’t provide you. If I remember correctly, I did not write down *everything*, and you do have some questions for me, do you not? Feel free to ask your uncle.”

Liven scoffed, opening his mouth to retort, but closed his mouth again. Then he asked, “Why exactly did you want to use me? I read that you needed my help, that’s why you killed my father and took his form. But for what?”

Austrella’s heart hammered as she glanced between both men; Liven was utterly serious while his uncle was irritatingly casual. “I like that one.” Elandrinor smiled. “First, let’s get in. We’ll sit and talk.”

Liven held Austrella tighter, keeping her close to him protectively as if he feared Elandrinor might snatch her away. “No. If you have the answer, just spit it out.” His voice was as cold as the winter.

Amusement danced in Elandrinor’s eyes. “Oh, arrogant, I see. And how surprising it is that you didn’t miss me. You thought I was dead after all.”

“Miss *you*? Miss you after learning that you killed my father and deceived me all these years? Overall, you just kidnapped my bride. Do you expect me to act calm right now? No, I’m boiling with anger and I advise you to be careful with me.”

“Oh, how interesting. What can you do when you cannot even use your powers?” His smile was mocking.

Austrella and Liven snorted at once. “And how interesting is that, because my curse is broken.”

Elandrinor's eyes widened in sheer surprise. "How did you find the powerful thing? Do not tell me finding my crystal broke your curse. Even if it did, I would not be disappointed, because my crystal is indeed powerful." He looked too proud of himself.

Liven snorted again. "Not powerful enough to break a curse. Love is the most powerful thing, and it freed me from my curse."

Surprise took over his uncle's wrinkled features. "I would've thought you're telling me some fairytale if I hadn't known you are not a liar. I must admit, after spending ten years pretending to be your father, I learned quite a lot about you. Now, let us get into the matter. How about I explain from the beginning since your lovely bride does not have any idea about the things we do."

Austrella didn't like his tone, it was more than irritating. Yet, she kept her silence in anticipation of his tale.

"Two days after your brothers were captured, I was coming back home because I wanted your help. With your powers, you could help me find powerful magic. I wanted to find magical objects. I reunited with your father in the woods and he told me what had happened. He spoke about the plan of you sneaking into the castle and saving your brothers with your powers. After getting that information, I killed him right away and took his blood before burying him and taking his form. Oh, you know, it was for his form. I needed his blood. This locket you see has a magic of shape-shifting, and with the blood of the person we want to portray, we can take their form. And yes, of course, all these years—ten years—I disguised myself as your father, my brother."

Elandrinor wore the locket again, as if it was a mere game for him, and shifted into Leopold within a matter of seconds. He smiled very casually and the way he acted flared Austrella's anger.

"Explain why," she demanded.

"Because I wanted to use my little nephew, of course," Elandrinor continued indifferently as if talking about the weather. "The whole family knew I was after magic and you all were against it, calling it *dark* magic. So, I knew you would not help me willingly; you left me with no choice. I knew you would do anything your father wanted you to do. You have always been like that, until, yes, until you became the *dark prince*. So, to use you, I had to take his blood, and to keep him

silent with my secret, I sent him to his grave. I must say it was surprising that you did not notice the difference. Perhaps I acted flawlessly.

“But I was pissed off when you were cursed, ruining my plans. However, when I connected with the enchanters as King Leopold and they agreed to help, I was delighted. They would not have helped if they knew who I really was. I hoped to break your curse, but turns out, your *curse* fulfilled my need to use you. As the enchanters brought magical objects, I kept them. They were what I have always wanted to find. And, putting their magic together, I created this.” He held up the orange crystal proudly. “There is another object I have heard about too, and as an enchanter gave me the location, I traveled with the guards *as* Leopold and found it. I returned to step down from the throne and leave, to carry out plans I have waited to do for over ten years. And it looks like you almost figured out about me.”

There was a heavy silence in the air for a moment before Liven scoffed angrily, and the weight of the truth sank within Austrella.

“I should’ve known,” he said. “I should’ve known earlier. But even without knowing, I had felt I lost my father along with my brothers. I even grieved over my father when I stared at his face because of the distance between us, like we were strangers. I believed the father I knew and loved died with my brothers... And he really had been gone then already.”

Elandrinor smiled, nodding. “Of course. I knew I could not be like your father, although I managed not to let you suspect me all this time. I made you believe it was all because of the grief. And of course, you would’ve known earlier if you had ever entered my room, which I knew you would not have because we were not close. Your annoying power-sensor is why I had to keep my crystal hidden. But you couldn’t sense the locket because it’s not powerful enough to radiate power like the crystal does.”

“How could you kill your own brother?” Austrella’s voice was thick with disbelief.

“There always comes a sacrifice for every powerful thing, and for powers, I had to make a sacrifice and that was my brother.”

“You call murdering your own brother a sacrifice?” Liven growled. “A brother who loved you so much that he spent half a year searching for you when we stopped receiving your letters? You call that sacrificing?”

“Of course, because it *was* a sacrifice and I had no other choice but do it. Now, tell me your next question. I’m sure you have plenty.”

“No, thank you. Your diary provided everything I need to know. And you will not continue anything because you’re leaving Catsimoor right away. If you won’t, I will banish you,” Liven ordered sharply.

“Oh, not that fast, little nephew.” Elandrinor waved his hand dismissively. “Are you certain you don’t have one more question? Because there is something that I did not disclose in my diary. Oh, forgot? Then let me ask you. Why did I not tell the people about Prince Adam and the truth about our bloodline? You answer.”

That question caught Austrella surprised. Why had she not thought of that while she suspected everything else King Leopold said?

“Oh, did you have a reason there too?” Liven asked.

Elandrinor’s eyes glinted. “Guessed well. Ten points to my little nephew! I did have a good reason, because if I let people know the truth of my bloodline, then I would have to be crowned officially, which I never did. I simply took the crown and placed it over my head and named myself king. Easy, is it not?

“There was no ceremony. No official crowning. Why? Because in crowning ceremonies, as part of the tradition, an enchanter uses his power and wave it upon the king as a declaration and a blessing. If an enchanter did that over me, my form would’ve been revealed. I’m still not certain if it would have been revealed, that is, if his powers would be more powerful than this locket, but I couldn’t take the risk...”

“And what about Adam?”

Elandrinor poked a finger at them. “Now that’s a good question. Let’s be honest, I really have no idea. I should have told them, right? But I did not. I kind of liked to watch you suffer.”

“You what?” Austrella exclaimed in disbelief, her anger simmering. “You are heartless!”

The wizard grinned. “Thank you, Your Highness, for the compliment. I will always treasure it in my heart—”

“You’re done playing. Now leave!” Liven growled.

The man appeared surprised and he raised his hands as if in surrender. “Calm down, Liven, because I *am* about to leave—and take my revenge on my enemies.

Therefore, I advise you not to make an enemy of me. You may have broken your curse, but you are not as powerful as I am. Besides, I would like to depart in peace before I work on my plan.”

“I will not let you hurt anyone.”

“I’m not a wizard who wants to take over a kingdom or kill innocent people. No, I’m a wizard who only wants to take revenge on the people who shoved him away when he humbly asked for help with magic. I will start with the king of Fiercedon who shoved me away not a year ago when I sought help. He has powers like you. Not an enchanter. Oh, I hope you do know you are far different from an enchanter.” His grin was sardonic. “Enchanters have this... this annoying limit, but your powers do not. He is like you, as young as you, but worse. So much worse than his father. Now that he has stepped onto the throne, he has become greedier. He shoved me away, threatening to freeze me if I didn’t leave him.” He snorted in amusement. “I would like him to know what it would be like to be frozen.”

“You don’t deserve kindness after what you did to your brother,” Liven snapped, tightening his arms even more around a furious Austrella.

Elandrinor waved his hand dismissively, casual, and continued his rant, “Then there is another king, a wizard, who shoved me away like a cat! He’s got a Redchress locked up in a tower at the palace in secret. I will release her and see what he can do—”

“There is a Redchress alive?” Liven asked, his voice shocked.

“What’s a Redchress?” Austrella asked, her voice innocent as she looked up at Liven. Opening his mouth to answer, he looked down, his eyes softening, and whatever he was going to say was forgotten.

“Oh, you don’t know?” Elandrinor asked pleasantly. “Of course, you don’t. But it’s rather surprising that almost everyone has forgotten about the first Redchress, who lived almost a century ago, with red eyes that have the power to make anyone obey, and worse, some to freeze. She can sing like a siren and control everyone in her sight. The first Redchress used her powers—”

“And killed half a country, I know that story and I will tell it to my bride by myself. You don’t have to bother. You must take your leave now.”

Elandrinor was unfazed by Liven’s demanding words and surrendered quickly. “Of course, I will, but...” He walked close. “We need to make a deal.”

“I will not make a—”

“A deal that will protect you and your kingdom from me,” Elandrinor explained. “I will not step into Catsimoor again and will not hurt your family if you promise not to be involved with my plans, try to stop me, or stand against me, no matter what.” His tone turned serious now, all amusement gone from his face.

Austrella looked up at Liven eagerly as he glared at his uncle, his jaw clenched. “Deal,” he spoke through gritted teeth.

Elandrinor smiled, satisfied. “Excellent. Now, I shall leave you in peace to fulfill my dreams. I wish you both a life full of happiness.” With another smile, he walked from the entrance to his waiting carriage.

Watching him leave in the carriage, Austrella told herself that, maybe, the peace was restored completely after all.

CHAPTER 22 | CERTAINTY

A deep breath escaped Austrella as Elandrinor's carriage was out of her sight.

She glanced down at the woods at the base of the mountain and an unexpected sight caught her eyes. They widened in surprise. There was an army of armed soldiers on horses spread across the valley. It was as if an entire army had come with their prince.

For her.

"I thought you came alone," she said, turning to Liven.

A smile graced his lips. "Don't you remember my promise, love? That I will send out an army to find you and bring you home? And I have. I came prepared."

Austrella's heart swelled, a wide smile breaking onto her face. She recalled his promise of determination to her persistent declaration of running away. Then her smile fell away and she wrapped her arms around him. "I'm so sorry about your father."

Liven sighed. "It's alright. Yes, I was shocked when I found out. But it's alright. I've felt like I had lost him a long time ago, even when I saw his face every day. It was as if he did not exist anymore since I thought he had changed after my brothers' death, that grief had made him like that. From then on, I not only grieved my brothers, but him as well," he said. "I'm tired of grieving, Ella, and I've spent these ten years grieving and grieving. I cannot do it anymore, and I will not. And truly, now I don't feel grief anymore."

"You don't?" She tipped her head up.

Liven's features softened when he looked down at her. "No, I don't. Because I have you," he confessed and placed a kiss on her forehead. "You pulled me from the grief from the moment I saw you. You saved me. From the moment you stepped into my life, the memories of my brothers stopped haunting me. You

gave me a purpose to live for and made me move on from the past, and I have. I feel free.”

The sheen of tears filled her eyes, and Austrella touched his face. “You won’t have that life again, I promise. I won’t let you feel the pain again.”

“You scared the life out of me twice today,” Liven said, his ocean eyes looking haunted. “The people have come to accept the truth, and me. During that moment, the moment I’ve only expected to happen in a dream, I noticed you weren’t around. I thought you were inside with your cousins. But then your cousins came out and you weren’t with them. They informed me they had searched everywhere for you and could not find you. I sent out the guards and they found the note. When they brought it to me...”

“I’m so sorry.” Austrella frowned. “He threatened to kill me if I didn’t agree to go with him, and I had no choice. I was his pawn to ensure you’d come here without an enchanter.”

“It’s okay. I am just glad you are okay, and all the trouble seems to be over now. Which means... it is finally time to get something out of my pocket.”

Austrella tilted her head. “What do you mean?”

Liven smiled and brushed a strand of hair away from her face. “I’ve been carrying something in my pocket for a few days, waiting for the day I’d break my curse, so I could take it out. I cannot wait much longer, Ella, not even an hour until we get to the castle and do this properly—”

Her eyes bulged. “Is it a ring?”

His shock mirrored hers. “How do you know?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Austrella’s breath hitched as exhilaration took over her. “What else would you carry around for days to give me?” she inquired, her fingers clinging onto his collar desperately. “Ask me.”

His ocean eyes glimmered and his lips curled into a smile, sending her heart galloping. “I don’t know if this is the right place to—”

“I don’t care where we are,” she interrupted desperately. “Ask me.”

Liven stared at her silently for a moment, his eyes filled with admiration. “Have I ever told you *how* much I love you? You carry this... air of boldness, so lively, that amazed me from the moment you first spoke to me. No one had ever dared to speak to me like that, sternly, but you... even when you once believed the people’s words that I’m dangerous, that if I get angry I will end up killing

people, you spoke to me fearlessly—and glared... oh, those glares! Have I ever told you they're adorably lovely?"

"Liven..." Austrella couldn't help her smile from widening.

"It's true, love. I hated it when people glared at me, even if they looked at me without fear, without hesitation, as you know that the weight of my title made me cold to everyone. But you..." Liven shook his head, his voice conveying his wonderment. "When you didn't glare, I yearned to see it and yearned to tell you how beautiful you look when you're mad and annoyed. Your rebellious words didn't anger me like others' would've. Instead, it captured my heart deeper. Your rebellious spirit, your determination, and everything that was supposed to fuel my anger only fueled the fire in my heart for you. Your smile enchanted me from the start, shone light into my darkness, and your laugh, a beautiful song in my mourning. Being with you made me feel alive like never before, and every second with you brought purpose to my life. Life became meaningful. How can I ever thank the Creator enough for you?" He cradled her face lovingly.

Her eyes were crammed with unshed tears, and her lips quivered as she tried to control a sob. She was enveloped in the homely warmth of his arms and a whirlwind of emotions that she couldn't place.

"Each second, I grew desperate for you. I couldn't stop thinking of you, so that I didn't care whether it was inappropriate or not when I came into your room almost every night and watched you sleep. You stole my heart even before I knew it, and I was after yours—"

"And it's yours," Austrella whispered breathlessly. A tear rolled down, and he was quick to wipe it away. "It will be always yours."

"I know, and I promise that I will never let it go." Placing a kiss on her forehead, Liven rested his forehead against hers. Every sentence he spoke was like a sweet caress to her heart. "I could tell you a billion times I love you and never get enough of it. You are the dream I never dared to dream of, the miracle I never knew was possible, and the love I believed only existed in stories. And here at this moment, I want to ask you a question I have died to—"

"Yes, I'll marry you," Austrella said abruptly, her tears running down her eyes free.

"I want your most certain answer—"

"I'm certain than any—"

“Not confused like the last time?”

Austrella stared at him in puzzlement before the memory resurfaced.

“Oh—*Liven!*” she called him admonishingly and shared a laugh with him. “I’m more sure than anything else that I want to be your wife. You must know, I was enchanted by you and *with* you from the moment I met you. Even the things I believed you did could not stop me from falling in love with you in a dance. It could not stop me from being enchanted by you, that you filled all my senses, making me say *yes*. I was confused, yes, but when you took my hand, when I looked into your eyes, my heart believed it saw our future in them. I was so enchanted by you, and I remain enchanted. I know I ran away after that when I *thought* I came to my senses. But Liven, I couldn’t stop thinking of you and... all the things you made me feel. I was confused then, yes, but here I stand, more certain than anything else in the world that I want to marry you. And I’m utterly impatient, so if you don’t give me the ring, I will take it myself and wear it before I kiss you unstoppably,” she threatened with a playful grin.

Liven laughed. “As much as I would love to see my rebellious princess try that, I’m impatient too. I know I chose you, and we are betrothed, but I haven’t officially proposed to you, and I’ve been dying to ask you...” He got down on one knee, a hand holding hers, while the other pulled out a ring from his pocket.

The diamond ring shone, flashing in her mind pictures of the bright future ahead of them.

“Princess Austrella, will you marry me?”

Her heart soared to the heavens. Her happiness knew no boundaries and her heart jumped in overflowing unadulterated joy. “Yes, yes, a billion yeses!” Austrella exclaimed before throwing her arms around him and crashing her lips to his.

Liven caught her and rose to his feet as he kissed her back, gently holding her face. He deepened the kiss, igniting an inferno of passion. Eventually he wrapped his arms around her, while hers wrapped around his neck, drawing him even closer until she felt his heart pounding in rhythm with hers.

When they pulled away, their foreheads touched. They smiled brightly with a glance that spoke more than any words could. He slipped the ring onto her finger. It fit perfectly. He planted a kiss on her hand before capturing her lips again.

“Wait.” Liven pulled away as quickly as he had closed the distance. “You do realize that becoming my wife also means you will become the queen of Catsimoor, don’t you?”

Austrella tilted her head as she smiled. “Very much. But I’m nervous.”

“Nervous to be my wife or the queen?”

“I’m confident and desperate to be your wife, Liven. Nervous only about being the queen.”

“On my way here, a guard who had attended the meeting told me about a brave woman, a bold princess, who stood on a tabletop and shouted the truth to a room full of people fearlessly.” His thumb stroked her cheek. “You never cease to amaze me. There’s no doubt about you becoming the most wonderful queen Catsimoor had ever has and ever will.”

Austrella’s heart couldn’t melt further. She laughed, shaking her head. “Oh, I’m flattered, Your Highness. But I shall remind you that I do not know the first thing about being a queen.”

“There’s nothing major you need to know when the first thing about being a ruler is already in you.”

She stared into the depths of his ocean eyes. “What?”

Liven planted a sweet kiss on her lips before whispering, “Your heart.”

Austrella had expected an angry storm when they reached the palace where everyone had been waiting for them. However, her cousins were far more understanding than she had expected them to be and did not start any storm.

Alondra barely remembered her—as Austrella—as she was only five when Austrella and her family fled ten years ago, but she welcomed her back warmly. “I feel like I know you better than what I remember,” she then said.

Marilee arrived at the castle shortly, after she had spread the news about Austrella’s identity and the truth about Adam. Austrella apologized to her for not seeking her out earlier, which Marilee forgave easily, but she was still stunned at the revelation of the truth. Austrella assumed everyone in Catsimoor was shocked about the rightful royal family at this point, as well as about her and her family.

Austrella invited her to join her and her cousins in the drawing room, but Marilee was hesitant, saying she was only a servant. Austrella admonished her,

telling her she was a close friend. When Marilee addressed her with formalities, Austrella admonished her again.

"I cannot believe a princess worked in the kitchen with us," Marilee said in disbelief. "And, you knew *how* to work, too."

Alondra laughed. "I've wanted to ask you that. *How* did you work? How did you know what to do?"

Her question amused Austrella. Everyone knew princesses didn't know kitchen duties. Even back in Westlock, she would rather hunt with her father than cook with her mother.

"It was tough. I hardly knew anything. It was tougher when I couldn't see any of you."

Her cousins frowned at that and sighed together. Guilt was etched on their faces, especially Aquila's. "I don't think I could ever forgive myself—"

"Oh, hush, you," Austrella interrupted Aquila. "You didn't know, and it was not your fault. There is no need to feel guilt because I chose it for myself. Now, let's not ruin the moment. We're now reunited, are we not? That's all that matters." Yet, she couldn't help but look at the past and see the way she had come through.

"Did you choose *Rella Austen* as well?" Alondra asked, now a smile blooming on her face. "How did it feel to have a new name? I've always wanted a different name, like a second name."

"Oh, please, you make it sound like I'm lucky to have another name." Austrella stifled a laugh. "I hated it so much. Mama wanted me to choose names that do not include '*Ella*' in it, but the mere thought of a new name drove me mad and I wanted a name that included my nickname in it. Rella is a part of my given name, and—"

Marilee gasped. "And Austen! Did you choose Austen because it has the beginning of your given name? *Aust*?"

"Why didn't I think of that?" Aquila glanced at Marilee, impressed.

With a nod at her friend's clever guessing, Austrella opened her mouth, only to be beaten by a new voice.

"Who is Aust?" Adam entered the room with an air of casualness and jovialness, almost startling Austrella.

Aquila was startled and almost jumped, a hand on her chest. "Have I ever told you that you always come unexpectedly and startle everyone? You've done that since I can remember!"

Adam grinned. "And I shall do it *till* you can remember," he said mischievously. "But as for now, dinner is ready, ladies. And those who are late cannot swallow the food, so better come now."

Austrella blinked even though she was aware it was only a joke; an urge to laugh surged in her. "What?" she voiced together with Alondra.

"Oh, is that some sort of spell?" Aquila asked, her voice equally mischievous as her cousin before she slammed a palm onto her forehead. "Ugh, I knew summoning such a large number of enchanters was going to end up disastrous."

Austrella laughed, recalling Aquila knowing how to play Adam's games more than she did.

Marilee looked genuinely concerned. "Wait—would the enchanters really do that?"

"Oh, of course they would, if you're late. Because, being late means you're less grateful for—"

"Ignore him, Marilee; no one is going to make you choke on the food."

As they left for dinner, Marilee was once again hesitant. Austrella insisted she was a good friend and that she would be treated no less. Marilee's smile was bright at those words and her eyes shone with tears.

Austrella's cousins and Marilee walked past her when they reached the dining hall, but she stood rooted at the entrance. Her paternal family and half of her maternal family were present, each one taking their seat at the long banquet table. Chatter and laughter filled the air. Some of the enchanters were present as well.

Austrella's lips turned up into a smile and tears welled up in her eyes.

Her memories took her back to the first day at her uncle's manor, when her paternal family had a family dinner and she served had them. A time when they didn't recognize her, when they appeared happy together in the absence of her and her family. A memory that used to hurt her until the day Liven chose her.

Now looking back, Austrella saw the purpose of all her pain.

"Everything alright, my love?"

Austrella spun around to find Liven behind her, a smile on his lips that vanished as soon as their eyes met. “Liven.” She beamed wide. She had not seen him in the last hour she spent with her cousins and friend, and she missed him already.

“Hey, what happened?” His voice dropped low in concern at the sight of her tears, eyebrows furrowing as he reached out to hold her. “What’s wrong?”

Austrella smiled brightly between her tears. “Nothing is wrong. They’re just happy tears,” she assured him before glancing back at the gathering of people, encircled in his arms. “I just remembered the family dinner on the day I began working at my uncle’s manor, when they didn’t recognize me... and it’s just...” She turned back to him, who remained deeply concerned. “I’m just happy to see everyone together.”

Liven sighed in relief as if he had thought she was hurt, and smiled before pulling her closer. “No one will ever take you away from your family again. And *never* from me. I promise you that.” He placed a kiss on her head. “There’s something I need to ask you. Your father refuses to stay here at the palace, even when I insisted he should—this was his home, after all. But he has chosen to stay with Duke Travis and his family and...”

“I won’t leave you, Liven,” her words were a vow. “If they want to go, then they can go, but I will stay here. I’m sure Adam will want to stay as well. I can’t think of being away from you. And, let’s not forget how *and* why you dragged me from Uncle’s manor to here in the first place.” She smirked.

His eyes gleamed. “That’s all I want to know.” His voice was a rhythm. “I cannot live away from you, Ella.”

Austrella’s cheeks hurt from her smile. She couldn’t help it.

How could she anyway? She loved him and every moment with him. In his arms, she found all that she had ever wanted.

It felt like heaven.

“Ready to announce our *official* engagement?”

Liven smirked. “I was ready from the moment I chose you that night, Princess.”

Epilogue

Married.

Austrella could barely believe that her dream, which had once been a nightmare, was now fulfilled. She was married to the dark prince whom she had spent ten years of her life hating, but now she loved him more than she thought to be possible.

When she looked into his ocean eyes, she was reassured that this was real, and not a dream she often used to have before their engagement.

Strings of twinkling, magical fairy lights hung from the trees and curled around the flowers that surrounded the newlyweds in the garden. Despite the decorated lights shinning around, the moon cast its own light, making the moment even more mesmerizing. A natural and ethereal arch stood above them as if shielding them from the snow. The garden had now turned into a wonderland for their private dance on their wedding day, and it was all Liven's planning.

The ground where they danced was covered with a carpet of red rose petals. It was as if they were dancing on a bed of roses. At each twirl, the petals floated around them by the force of her gown's whirl, making the dance even more magical than it already was.

Winter wasn't over yet, but the cold bothered neither of them. In her husband's arms, winter had always turned to summer. Austrella was enveloped in his warmth that would never cease to make her heartbeat race.

Her eyes were locked onto his from the moment their private dance began, and her heart couldn't stop its erratic jumping. His hand that held hers, their fingers interlocked, assured her each moment that this was real.

Austrella had never been happier. It was infinite.

"I wish we could sneak into our chambers right after this," Liven said, their bodies moving in perfect harmony. "I don't want to go back in there to our guests. I just want to celebrate alone with you, timelessly."

Austrella's flushed cheeks burned. "Me too, but we can't. Adam will have your head if we do. I've promised him two more dances." Her smile was mischievous.

"Right. Breaking promises to Adam is hazardous." Liven nodded before he leaned in and stole a kiss on her lips. "I wanted to hold this dance in our maze, but Adam advised that having a wedding-day special private dance in the maze would not be a pleasant way to start our lives. He says—"

"Don't tell me you believed that."

"Of course, I didn't. I *wouldn't*. Aquila said the same and insisted that I mustn't choose the maze."

Austrella chuckled. "They must be reading the same book then," she said, eliciting a laugh from him.

"But whatever magic the book holds that has them both under control, it will not stop us from going there on our wedding day. How does going to the maze sound to you? Thankfully, no Adam is present to stop us," Liven quipped.

Austrella grinned. "I'd love that."

Moving further into the garden, they reached the hedge maze that exuded a welcoming and thrilled ambiance. Her smile grew wide when they reached the heart of the maze where the fountain was.

Where they had met for the first time.

Memories floated in the air like they always had whenever she had come here before.

With a smile that spoke more than words could, Liven led her to the center and they continued their dance. He spun her around graciously, and when he drew her back, he began, "Have I told you that we could've been married on that very first day? You looked confidently ready for our wedding in that white dress. It took all my willpower not to tell you this then."

Austrella melted into his arms, their dance slower than before. "Mhm? And do you know what the old Austrella would've done if you'd told her this?"

Liven smirked. "She would've said a happy *yes* and done this." He captured her lips in a passionate kiss.

Austrella laughed when she pulled away. “Did you really expect her to do so then? Oh, she would’ve called you the idiot of the century.” Her lips stretched wide in a teasing smile.

“Oh, I know what exactly she would’ve done. She would’ve taken off her slipper and thrown it at—”

“Liven!” she called him admonishingly and laughed. “I don’t think she would’ve done that; it was her *precious* magical slipper and she was wearing it then.”

“But she did throw her slipper at me once, when she was infatuatedly infuriated with me,” Liven quipped, eliciting another laugh from her.

“I truly apologize for being so rebellious with you.”

“You’re not allowed to apologize for creating the sweetest of memories, my rebellious princess.”

She widened her eyes in mock surprise. “How come I’m *still* a princess when you crowned me Queen today, King Liven?” Her grin grew teasing.

Only three weeks had passed since their official engagement. Liven became the king of Catsimoor a week ago—a moment that had her heart burst with pride—and it had been only less than six hours since she became the queen. *His* queen.

Liven had made a promise to her, to establish a law that no servant should be treated badly by their masters, when she had shared with him her experience in the manor a few days before her first escape attempt. And he fulfilled that promise right after he became King. The law took the people of Catsimoor by surprise, and they all appreciated it.

All of Catsimoor accepted their new ruler. The truth of his rightfulness shocked everyone, and they no longer accused Liven of his actions in the past. Duke Travis had a difficult time admitting his guilt to Liven, and it took him days to do so. Aquila told Austrella that her father believed admitting his fault was hurting his pride. Nevertheless, he did.

Austrella’s own father was still feeling guilty despite their forgiveness. Austrella knew that she would feel equally guilty if she were in his shoes. It would take time, she knew. Every time she saw him conversing with Liven, it was always an unbelievable sight, and she thanked the Creator for that.

Aquila and Alondra often came to the palace and bridged the gap between them that the past ten years had made. As did her other cousins.

Adam got rid of his ridiculously thick beard on the next day after his sister's engagement. He was as jovial as ever. At their engagement ball, Austrella caught him flirting with Princess Evelyn of Alentia—Liven had made peace with the kingdom of Alentia, Catsimoor's eternal enemy and the country where he grew up—and Adam confessed to like her.

Aquila pointed out they would be known as '*Adam and Eve*' if they ever got married. Since then, Adam avoided any mention of her, and Austrella found it both cute and hilarious.

Nevertheless, she was looking forward to the Creator's plans for his future.

Liven smiled at her words. A smile that could melt the snow around them with its undeniable warmth. "You will always be my rebellious princess no matter what, little queen."

"Don't tell me that's my new nickname!" Austrella exclaimed, feigning shock, just to hear his usual response.

"One of a hundred." He winked before whirling her around. "Have I told you that I've also wanted to call you *little grape*?" he asked, drawing her back into his arms. "I've found the way you eat grapes so adorable that I hardly held back myself from using the nickname. But now, there's no fear that you would throw your slipper at me."

"Liven!" She narrowed her eyes, feigning seriousness again, but amusement broke through it. "Wait, was that why... why you brought grapes every time we read together?"

"Yes, just to watch you eat them."

Her cheeks flushed and she leaned in to kiss him. But taking her by surprise, Liven dipped her low, effortlessly, making her laugh. His hold was unwavering so she didn't lose her balance.

When he straightened her, she chided teasingly, "Do warn before you do that again. For a moment, I thought my heart was going to jump out through my throat."

Liven chuckled deeply, his laugh a pleasant melody. "Do not fret about your heart, my love." He drew her closer, their breaths mingling. "I'm holding it firmly, and I will never, ever, let it go. It will always be safe with me."

Austrella's eyes dampened, overwhelmed by the unfathomable love in his eyes. "You are my heart."

The world ceased to exist when Liven closed the distance and kissed her with a tenderness that could only be born from deep and true love. She dropped her hand from his and found its way to his face, kissing him back.

Austrella could never thank the merciful Creator for all He had done for them. For all of her life, she would live thanking Him.

In that moment of love, nothing mattered. He was hers and she was his forever; *that* was all that mattered. Their love was an eternal fire, their hearts and souls entwined.

They pulled away breathlessly, and their foreheads rested together. "What a beautiful miracle from the Creator you are," Liven said quietly. "You breathed life into my hollow heart, and mended it, making it beat faster than I thought to be possible. I love you, Ella; for all of my life I will tell you I love you. This is just the beginning of our own forever."

Austrella loved this man impossibly, loved him more and more each second. He was her miracle from the Creator, too.

"I love you too, Liven. More than you will ever know. You shifted my entire world at the maze. Right here." A tear slipped her eye. "Thank you. Thank you for choosing me even when I declared I hated the dark prince. Thank you for not giving up on me even when I rebelliously asked you to let me go. Thank you for never letting me go." Her lips trembled. "Thank you for chasing after me every time I ran away from you. Thank you for believing that no matter what, I belong with you, and thank you for—"

"Hey." Liven's eyes were now damp, and they shone like gems. He cupped her face, holding it like a treasure. "Don't thank me, Ella. The Creator had written our destiny perfectly, and we were born to find each other. And I love you, Austrella, from the day I met you. So deeply that I was ready to give up anything to have you. You, my love, are the best thing that had happened in my entire life."

She sighed softly. "I don't know what I would've done if I hadn't met the enchanting stranger in the maze..."

"Mr. I shall reveal my name after the ball?"

Austrella laughed between her happy tears. "Yes, yes, him. But... I don't have to worry about what I would've done without you, because we are meant to be."

The Creator had made us to be together, and there's nothing more beautiful than that." She smiled wide, and he returned it. "A forever with you is beyond my wildest dreams."

"You are my forever," King Liven said. His ocean eyes twinkled. The stars, the moon, and the sun couldn't be compared to their beauty, light, and the love that filled them. He kissed her forehead tenderly. "My forever and my everything."

Acknowledgment

Dear reader, thank you. Thank you so much from the bottom of my heart for reading *The Dark Prince's Choice* and for staying with me on this magical journey until the end. I can't explain how happy I am that you chose to read this book; it was amazing to have you on this journey!

Words cannot describe how grateful I am to my beloved Father, Jesus, for everything He has done. I'm always left in awe of His unconditional love. Without Him, nothing would have been created. It's all because of Him, and it's all for Him!

To my sister, Kare; I don't know how to thank you enough for all your help and support, for spending your time editing my book! I couldn't have done this without you. You have no idea how much happiness I felt every time you told me about the scenes you loved, that made you cry (and I love how you pointed at your running tears and said I was responsible for them, as you were reading the chapter *Unbroken*) and how much you love my characters—literally everything! And I am beyond happy that we are publishing our first fairytale retellings together on the same day. Oh yes, I shouldn't begin on how much I love your book, the little mermaid retelling (*Mermaid on Heels*), because I love it so much. But not as much as I love you ;)

To my beta reader, Laurie; I'm wordless. I don't know where to begin, so I just want to say—thank you. Thank you so much for the time you spent on this book, for every single suggestion you made, helping me reword so many lines, and helping me polish my nearly messy book! Thank you for everything. Sending you love!

To my bookstagram friends; your support has filled my heart with joy, and it always does. I'm so grateful to have you!

To my ARC team; I was so surprised at how many people signed up for the ARC team. Maybe it's not too many for some, but it is a big deal to me, and I'm so touched by your enthusiasm and support! Thank you!

Writing *The Dark Prince's Choice* was such a magical experience. I wrote this book right after a week I got the idea and finished it within a month, two weeks, and four days. And I can't explain how happy I am now that it's out to the world!

I hope you loved Liven and Austrella's story as much as I do! If you love it, please leave a review on Amazon/Goodreads! If you love it, recommend it to your friends! And if you're reading this in the paperback, please share a picture of the book with me! Don't hesitate to reach out to me on Instagram; it's @lynauthordaliath there!

Once again, my dear reader, thank you. I'm looking forward to having you in my next journey!

Stay Tuned!

Curious to know what happens to the king of Fierceden, about whom Elandrinor hinted at taking revenge by freezing him? Well, his story is on the way, and it's going to be a retelling of Beauty and the Beast.

So, stay tuned!

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About The Author

Katelyn Daliath is a Christian young adult, living with her beloved parents and sister—the author of *The Romeo Of Her Juliet*. She loves God more than anything, and lives her life fully dedicated to Him—and so are her every book.

She writes sweet, clean and captivating romances, mainly fantasy and fairytale romance. Writing was never her dream until she became a Narnia fan and began writing fanfictions in her diary. She started off publishing on Wattpad before God made led her to be an author. She loves reading, watching movies, singing, travelling, listening to music, writing songs, talking with her sister, making friends and also loves animals. Her greatest dream is to become a singer. She'd be over the moon if you could connect with her on Instagram @lynauthordaliath. Stay tuned for epic and swoony romances from her that you wouldn't want to miss!